ASSASSIN'S CREED

THE COMPLETE COLLECTION

OLIVER BOWDEN

Oliver Bowden

ASSASSIN'S CREED®

Renaissance
Brotherhood
The Secret Crusade
Revelations
Forsaken
Black Flag
Unity
Underworld

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Assassin's Creed: The Official Film Tie-In

Oliver Bowden

ASSASSIN'S CREED®

Renaissance

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While I thought that I was learning how to live,
I have been learning how to die.
– Leonardo da Vinci

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Venice
Padua
Duchy of Milan
Republic of Venice
Rep. of Genoa
Ravenna
Forlì
Florence
Ancona
Siena
Papal States
Adriatic Sea
Corsica
Rome
Kingdom of Naples
Naples
Kingdom of Sardinia
Tyrrhenian Sea
Kingdom of Sicily
Duchy of Modena
Papal States
Ravenna
Forlì
Lucca
Careggi
Florence
Rep. of Florence
San Gimignano
Volterra
Monteriggioni
Siena
Monticiano
Rep. of Siena
Papal States
0
100 miles
0
150 km

1

Torches gleamed and flickered high on the towers of the Palazzo Vecchio and the Bargello, and just a few lanterns shimmered in the cathedral square a little way to the north. Some also illuminated the quays along the banks of the River Arno, where, late as it was for a city where most people retired indoors with the coming of night, a few sailors and stevedores could be seen through the gloom. Some of the sailors, still attending to their ships and boats, hastened to make final repairs to rigging and to coil rope neatly on the dark, scrubbed decks, while the stevedores hurried to haul or carry cargo to the safety of the nearby warehouses.

Lights also glimmered in the winehouses and the brothels, but very few people walked the streets. It had been seven years since the then twenty-year-old Lorenzo de' Medici had been elected to the leadership of the city, bringing with him at least a sense of order and calm to the intense rivalry between the leading international banking and merchant families who had made Florence one of the wealthiest cities in the world. Despite this, the city had never ceased to simmer, and occasionally boil over, as each faction strove for control, some of them shifting alliances, some remaining permanent and implacable enemies.

Florence, in the Year of Our Lord 1476, even on a jasmine-sweet evening in spring, when you could almost forget the stench from the Arno if the wind was in the right direction, wasn't the safest place to be out in the open, after the sun had gone down.

The moon had risen in a now-cobalt sky, lording it over a host of attendant stars. Its light fell on the open square where the Ponte Vecchio, its crowded shops dark and silent now, joined the north bank of the river. Its light also found out a figure clad in black, standing on the roof of the church of Santo Stefano al

Ponte. A young man, only seventeen years old, but tall and proud. Surveying the neighbourhood below keenly, he put a hand to his lips and whistled, a low but penetrating sound. In response, as he watched, first one, then three, then a dozen, and at last twenty men, young like himself, most clad in black, some with blood-red, green or azure cowls or hats, all with swords and daggers at their belts, emerged from dark streets and archways into the square. The gang of dangerous-looking youths fanned out, a cocky assuredness in their movements.

The young man looked down at the eager faces, pale in the moonlight, gazing up at him. He raised his fist above his head in a defiant salute.

'We stand together!' he cried, as they too raised their fists, some drawing their weapons and brandishing them, and cheered: 'Together!'

The young man quickly climbed, catlike, down the unfinished façade from the roof to the church's portico, and from it leapt, cloak flying, to land in a crouch, safely in their midst. They gathered round, expectantly.

'Silence, my friends!' He held up a hand to arrest a last, lone shout. He smiled grimly. 'Do you know why I called you, my closest allies, here tonight? To ask your aid. For too long I have been silent while our enemy, you know who I mean, Vieri de' Pazzi, has gone about this town slandering my family, dragging our name in the mud, and trying in his pathetic way to demean us. Normally I would not stoop to kicking such a mangy cur, but –'

He was interrupted as a large, jagged rock, hurled from the direction of the bridge, landed at his feet.

'Enough of your nonsense, *grullo*,' a voice called.

The young man turned as one with his group in the direction of the voice. Already he knew who it belonged to. Crossing the bridge from the south side another gang of young men was approaching. Its leader swaggered at its head, a red cloak, held by a clasp bearing a device of golden dolphins and crosses on a blue ground, over his dark velvet suit, his hand on the pommel of his sword. He was a passably handsome man, his looks marred by a cruel mouth and a weak chin, and though he was a little fat, there was no doubting the power in his arms and legs.

'*Buona sera*, Vieri,' the young man said evenly. 'We were just talking about you.' And he bowed with exaggerated courtesy, while assuming a look of surprise. 'But you must forgive me. We were not expecting you personally. I thought the Pazzi always hired others to do their dirty work.'

Vieri, coming close, drew himself up as he and his troop came to a halt a few yards away. 'Ezio Auditore! You pampered little whelp! I'd say it was rather your family of penpushers and accountants that goes running to the guards

whenever there's the faintest sign of trouble. *Codardo!*' He gripped the hilt of his sword. 'Afraid to handle things yourself, I'd say.'

'Well, what can I say, Vieri, *ciccione*. Last time I saw her, your sister Viola seemed quite satisfied with the handling I gave *her*.' Ezio Auditore gave his enemy a broad grin, content to hear his companions snigger and cheer behind him.

But he knew he'd gone too far. Vieri had already turned purple with rage. 'That's quite enough from you, Ezio, you little prick! Let's see if you fight as well as you gabble!' He turned his head back to his men, raising his sword. 'Kill the bastards!' he bellowed.

At once another rock whirled through the air, but this time it wasn't thrown as a challenge. It caught Ezio a glancing blow on the forehead, breaking the skin and drawing blood. Ezio staggered back momentarily, as a hail of rocks flew from the hands of Vieri's followers. His own men barely had time to rally before the Pazzi gang was upon them, rushing over the bridge to Ezio and his men. All at once, the fighting was so close and so fast that there was hardly time at first to draw swords or even daggers, so the two gangs just went at each other with their fists.

The battle was hard and grim – brutal kicks and punches connected with the sickening sound of crunching bone. For a while it could have gone either way, then Ezio, his vision slightly impaired by the flow of blood from his forehead, saw two of his best men stumble and go down, to be trampled on by Pazzi thugs. Vieri laughed, and, close to Ezio, swung another blow at his head, his hand grasping a heavy stone. Ezio dropped to his haunches and the blow went wide, but it had been too close for comfort, and now the Auditore faction was getting the worst of it. Ezio did manage, before he could rise to his feet, to wrestle his dagger free and slice wildly but successfully at the thigh of a heavily built Pazzi thug who was bearing down at him with sword and dagger unsheathed. Ezio's dagger tore through fabric and into muscle and sinew, and the man let loose an agonized howl and went over, dropping his weapons and clutching at his wound with both hands as the blood belched forth.

Scrambling desperately to his feet, Ezio looked round. He could see that the Pazzi had all but surrounded his own men, penning them in against one wall of the church. Feeling some of the strength returning to his legs, he made his way towards his fellows. Ducking under the scything blade of another Pazzi henchman, he managed to connect his fist to the man's stubbly jaw and had the satisfaction of seeing teeth fly and his would-be assailant fall to his knees, stunned by the blow. He yelled to his own men to encourage them, but in truth his thoughts were turning to ways of beating a retreat with as much dignity as

possible, when above the noise of the fight he heard a loud, jovial and very familiar voice calling to him from behind the Pazzi mob.

‘Hey, *fratellino*, what the hell are you up to?’

Ezio’s heart pounded with relief, and he managed to gasp, ‘Hey, Federico! What are you doing here? I thought you’d be out on the tiles as usual!’

‘Nonsense! I knew you had something planned, and I thought I’d come along to see if my little brother had finally learned how to look after himself. But maybe you need another lesson or two!’

Federico Auditore, a few years Ezio’s senior and the oldest of the Auditore siblings, was a big man with a big appetite – for drink, for love and for battle. He waded in even as he was speaking, knocking two Pazzi heads together and bringing his foot up to connect with the jaw of a third as he strode through the throng to stand side by side with his brother, seeming impervious to the violence that surrounded him. Around them their own men, encouraged, redoubled their efforts. The Pazzi on the other hand were discomfited. A few of the dockyard hands had gathered at a safe distance to watch, and in the half-light the Pazzi mistook them for Auditore reinforcements. That and Federico’s roars and flying fists, his actions quickly emulated by Ezio, who learnt fast, very quickly panicked them.

Vieri de’ Pazzi’s furious voice rose above the general tumult. ‘Fall back!’ he called to his men, his voice broken with exertion and anger. He caught Ezio’s eye and snarled some inaudible threat before disappearing into the darkness, back across the Ponte Vecchio, followed by those of his men who could still walk, and hotly pursued by Ezio’s now triumphant allies.

Ezio was about to follow suit, but his brother’s meaty hand restrained him. ‘Just a minute,’ he said.

‘What do you mean? We’ve got them on the run!’

‘Steady on.’ Federico was frowning, gently touching the wound on Ezio’s brow.

‘It’s just a scratch.’

‘It’s more than that,’ his brother decided, a grave expression on his face. ‘We’d better get you to a doctor.’

Ezio spat. ‘I haven’t got time to waste running to doctors. Besides…’ He paused ruefully. ‘I haven’t any money.’

‘Hah! Wasted it on women and wine, I suppose.’ Federico grinned, and slapped his younger brother warmly on the shoulder.

‘Not wasted exactly, I’d say. And look at the example *you* set me.’ Ezio grinned but then hesitated. He suddenly became aware that his head was

thumping. ‘Still, it wouldn’t hurt to get it checked out. I suppose you couldn’t see your way to lending me a few *fiorini*?’

Federico patted his purse. It didn’t jingle. ‘Fact is, I’m a bit short myself just now,’ he said.

Ezio grinned at his brother’s sheepishness. ‘And what have you wasted yours on? Masses and Indulgences, I suppose?’

Federico laughed. ‘All right. I take your point.’ He looked around. In the end, only three or four of their own people had been hurt badly enough to remain on the field of battle, and they were sitting up, groaning a bit, but grinning too. It had been a tough set-to, but no one had broken any bones. On the other hand, a good half-dozen Pazzi henchmen lay completely out for the count, and one or two of them at least were expensively dressed.

‘Let’s see if our fallen enemies have any riches to share,’ Federico suggested. ‘After all, our need is greater than theirs, and I’ll bet you can’t lighten their load without waking them up!’

‘We’ll see about that,’ said Ezio, and set about it with some success. Before a few minutes had elapsed, he’d harvested enough gold coins to fill both their own purses. Ezio looked over to his brother triumphantly and jingled his newly claimed wealth to emphasize the point.

‘Enough!’ cried Federico. ‘Better leave them a bit to limp home on. After all, we’re not thieves – this is just the spoils of war. And I still don’t like the look of that wound. We must get it seen to double quick.’

Ezio nodded, and turned to survey the field of the Auditore victory one last time. Losing patience, Federico rested a hand on his younger brother’s shoulder. ‘Come on,’ he said, and without more ado he set off at such a pace that the battle-weary Ezio found it hard to keep up, though when he fell too far behind, or took a wrong turn down an alley, Federico would hold up, or hurry back to put him right. ‘I’m sorry, Ezio. I just want us to get to the *medico* as soon as we can.’

And indeed it wasn’t far, but Ezio was tiring by the minute. Finally they reached the shadowy room, festooned with mysterious instruments and phials of brass and glass, ranged along dark oak tables and hanging from the ceiling along with clusters of dried herbs, where their family doctor had his surgery. It was all Ezio could do to remain on his feet.

Dottore Ceresa was not best pleased at being roused in the middle of the night, but his manner changed to one of concern as soon as he had brought a candle close enough to inspect Ezio’s wound in detail. ‘Hmmn,’ he said gravely. ‘You’ve made quite a mess of yourself this time, young man. Can’t you people think of anything better to do than go around beating each other up?’

‘It was a question of honour, good doctor,’ put in Federico.

‘I see,’ said the doctor, evenly.

‘It’s really nothing,’ said Ezio, though he felt faint.

Federico, as usual hiding concern behind humour, said, ‘Do patch him up as best you can, friend. That pretty little face of his is his only asset.’

‘Hey, *fottiti*!’ Ezio hit back, giving his brother the finger.

The doctor ignored them, washed his hands, probed the wound gently, and poured some clear fluid from one of his many bottles on to a piece of linen. He dabbed the wound with this and it stung so much that Ezio almost sprang from his chair, his face screwed up with the pain. Then, satisfied that the wound was clean, the doctor took a needle and threaded it with fine catgut.

‘Now,’ he said. ‘This really will hurt, a little.’

Once the stitches were in and the wound bandaged so that Ezio looked like a turbaned Turk, the doctor smiled encouragement. ‘That’ll be three *fiorini*, for now. I’ll come to your palazzo in a few days and remove the stitches. That’ll be another three *fiorini* to pay then. You’ll have a terrible headache, but it’ll pass. Just try to rest – if it’s in your nature! And don’t worry: the wound looks worse than it is, and there’s even a bonus: there shouldn’t be much of a scar, so you won’t be disappointing the ladies too greatly in future!’

Once they were back in the street, Federico put his arm round his younger brother. He pulled out a flask and offered it to Ezio. ‘Don’t worry,’ he said, noticing the expression on Ezio’s face. ‘It’s our father’s best grappa. Better than mother’s milk for a man in your condition.’

They both drank, feeling the fiery liquid warm them. ‘Quite a night,’ said Federico.

‘Indeed. I only wish they were all as much fun as –’ but Ezio interrupted himself as he saw that his brother was beginning to grin from ear to ear. ‘Oh, wait!’ he corrected himself, laughing: ‘They are!’

‘Even so, I think a little food and drink wouldn’t be a bad thing to set you up before we go home,’ said Federico. ‘It’s late, I know, but there’s a taverna nearby where they don’t close until breakfast time and –’

‘– you and the *oste* are *amici intimi*?’

‘How did you guess?’

An hour or so later, after a meal of *ribollita* and *bistecca* washed down with a bottle of Brunello, Ezio felt as if he’d never been wounded at all. He was young and fit, and felt that all his lost energy had flowed back into him. The adrenaline of the victory over the Pazzi mob certainly contributed to the swiftness of his recovery.

‘Time to go home, little brother,’ said Federico. ‘Father’s sure to be wondering where we are, and you’re the one he looks to to help him with the bank. Luckily

for me, I've no head for figures, which is why I suppose he can't wait to get me into politics!'

'Politics or the circus – the way you carry on.'

'What's the difference?'

Ezio knew that Federico bore him no ill will over the fact that their father confided more of the family business in him than in his elder brother. Federico would die of boredom if confronted by a life in banking. The problem was, Ezio had a feeling that he might be the same. But for the moment, the day when he donned the black velvet suit and the gold chain of a Florentine banker was still some way off, and he was determined to enjoy his days of freedom and irresponsibility to the full. Little did he realize just how short-lived those days would be.

'We'd better hurry, too,' Federico was saying, 'if we want to avoid a bollocking.'

'He may be worried.'

'No – he knows we can take care of ourselves.' Federico was looking at Ezio speculatively. 'But we *had* better get a move on.' He paused. 'You don't feel up to a little wager at all, do you? A race perhaps?'

'Where to?'

'Let's say,' Federico looked across the moonlit city towards a tower not far away. 'The roof of Santa Trinità. If it's not going to take too much out of you – and it's not far from home. But there's just one thing more.'

'Yes?'

'We're not racing along the streets, but across the rooftops.'

Ezio took a deep breath. 'OK. Try me,' he said.

'All right, little *tartaruga* – go!'

Without another word, Federico was off, scaling a nearby roughcast wall as easily as a lizard would. He paused at the top, seeming almost to teeter among the rounded red tiles, laughed, and was off again. By the time Ezio had reached the rooftops, his brother was twenty yards ahead. He set off in pursuit, his pain forgotten in the adrenaline-fuelled excitement of the chase. Then he saw Federico take an almighty leap across a pitch-black void, to land lightly on the flat roof of a grey palazzo slightly below the level of the one he had jumped from. He ran a little way further, and waited. Ezio felt a glimmer of fear as the chasm of the street eight storeys below loomed before him, but he knew that he would die rather than hesitate in front of his brother, and so, summoning up his courage, he took a massive leap of faith, seeing, as he soared across, the hard granite cobbles in the moonlight far beneath his feet as they flailed the air. For a split second he wondered if he'd judged it right, as the hard grey wall of the

palazzo seemed to rise up to meet him, but then, somehow, it sank below him and he was on the new roof, sprawling slightly it was true, but still on his feet, and elated, though breathing hard.

'Baby brother still has much to learn,' taunted Federico, setting off again, a darting shadow among the chimney-stacks under the scattering of clouds. Ezio hurled himself forward, lost in the wildness of the moment. Other abysses yawned beneath him, some defining mere alleyways, others broad thoroughfares. Federico was nowhere to be seen. Suddenly the tower of Santa Trinità rose before him, rising from the red sweep of the church's gently sloping roof. But as he approached he remembered that the church stood in the centre of a square, and that the distance between its roof and those of the surrounding buildings was far greater than any he had yet leapt. He dared not hesitate or lose speed now – his only hope was that the church roof was lower than the one he would have to jump from. If he could throw himself forward with enough force, and truly launch himself into the air, gravity would do the rest. For one or two seconds he would fly like a bird. He forced any thought of the consequences of failure out of his mind.

The edge of the roof he was on approached fast, and then – nothing. He soared, listening to the air whistle in his ears, bringing tears into his eyes. The church roof seemed an infinite distance away – he would never reach it, he would never laugh or fight or hold a woman in his arms again. He couldn't breathe. He shut his eyes, and then…

His body bent double, he was steadying himself with his hands and feet, but they were supported again – he had made it, within inches of the edge, but he had made it on to the church roof!

But where was Federico? He clambered up to the base of the tower and turned to look back the way he had come, just in time to see his brother flying through the air himself. Federico landed firmly, but his weight sent one or two of the red clay tiles slithering out of place and he almost lost his footing as the tiles slid down the roof and off the edge, shattering a few seconds later on the hard cobbles far below. But Federico had found his balance again, and he stood up, panting for sure, but with a broad, proud smile on his face.

'Not such a *tartaruga* after all,' he said, as he came up and clapped Ezio on the shoulder. 'You went past me like greased lightning.'

'I didn't even know that I had,' said Ezio briefly, trying to catch his breath.

'Well, you won't beat me up to the top of the tower,' retorted Federico, pushing Ezio to the side, and he started to clamber up the squat tower which the city fathers were thinking of replacing with something of a more modern design. This time Federico made it first, and even had to give a hand up to his wounded

brother, who was beginning to feel that bed would be no bad thing. They were both out of breath, and stood while they recovered to look out over their city, serene and silent in the oyster-light of dawn.

‘It is a good life we lead, brother,’ said Federico with uncharacteristic solemnity.

‘The best,’ Ezio agreed. ‘And may it never change.’

They both paused – neither wishing to break the perfection of the moment – but after a while Federico quietly spoke. ‘May it never change us either, *fratellino*. Come, we must get back. There is the roof of our palazzo. Pray God Father hasn’t stayed up all night, or we really will be for it. Let’s go.’

He made for the edge of the tower in order to climb back down to the roof, but stopped when he saw that Ezio had remained where he was. ‘What is it?’

‘Wait a minute.’

‘What are you looking at?’ asked Federico, rejoining him. He followed Ezio’s gaze and then his face broke out into a grin. ‘You sly devil! You’re not thinking of going there now, are you? Let the poor girl sleep!’

‘No – I think it’s time Cristina woke up.’

Ezio had met Cristina Calfucci only a short time before, but already they seemed inseparable, despite the fact that their parents still deemed them too young to form a serious alliance. Ezio disagreed, but Cristina was only seventeen and her parents expected Ezio to rein in his wild habits before they would even begin to look more kindly on him. Of course, this only served to make him more impetuous.

Federico and he had been lounging in the main market after buying some trinkets for their sister’s Saint’s Day, watching the pretty girls of the town with their *accompagnatrice* as they flitted from stall to stall, examining lace here, ribbons and bolts of silk there. But one girl had stood out from her companions, more beautiful and graceful than anyone Ezio had ever seen before. Ezio would never forget that day, the day on which he had first set eyes on her.

‘Oh,’ he had gasped involuntarily. ‘Look! She’s so beautiful.’

‘Well,’ said his ever-practical brother. ‘Why don’t you go over and say hello?’

‘What?’ Ezio was shocked. ‘And after I’ve said hello – what then?’

‘Well, you could try talking to her. What you’ve bought, what she’s bought – it doesn’t matter. You see, little brother, most men are so afraid of beautiful girls that anyone who actually plucks up the courage to have a chat stands at an immediate advantage. What? You think they don’t *want* to be noticed, they don’t *want* to enjoy a little conversation with a man? Of course they do! Anyway,

you're not bad-looking, and you *are* an Auditore. So go for it – and I'll distract the chaperone. Come to think of it, she's not so bad-looking herself.'

Ezio remembered how, left alone with Cristina, rooted to the spot, at a loss for words, drinking in the beauty of her dark eyes, her long, soft auburn hair, her tip-tilted nose…

She stared at him. 'What is it?' she asked.

'What d'you mean?' he blurted out.

'Why are you just standing there?'

'Oh… erhm… because I wanted to ask you something.'

'And what might that be?'

'What's your name?'

She rolled her eyes. Damn, he thought, she's heard it all before. 'Not one you'll ever need to make use of,' she said. And off she went. Ezio stared after her for a moment, then set off after her.

'Wait!' he said, catching up, more breathless than if he'd run a mile. 'I wasn't ready. I was planning on being really charming. And suave! And witty! Won't you give me a second chance?'

She looked back at him without breaking her stride, but she did give him the faintest trace of a smile. Ezio had been in despair, but Federico had been watching and called to him softly: 'Don't give up now! I saw her smile at you! She'll remember you.'

Taking heart, Ezio had followed her – discreetly, taking care she wouldn't notice. Three or four times he had to dart behind a market stall, or, after she had left the square, duck into a doorway, but he'd managed to tail her pretty successfully right up to the door of her family mansion, where a man he recognized had blocked her path. Ezio had drawn back.

Cristina looked at the man angrily. 'I've told you before, Vieri, I'm not interested in you. Now, let me pass.'

Ezio, concealed, drew in a breath. Vieri de' Pazzi! Of course!

'But *signorina*, I am interested. Very interested indeed,' said Vieri.

'Then join the queue.'

She tried to get past him, but he moved in front of her. 'I don't think so, *amore mio*. I've decided that I'm tired of waiting for you to open your legs of your own volition.' And he seized her roughly by the arm, drawing her close, putting his other arm round her as she struggled to get free.

'I'm not sure you're getting the message,' said Ezio suddenly, stepping forward and looking Vieri in the eye.

'Ah, the little Auditore whelp. *Cane rognoso!* What the hell do you have to do with this? To the devil with you.'

‘And *buon’giorno* to you too, Vieri. I’m so sorry to intrude, but I have the distinct impression that you’re spoiling this young lady’s day.’

‘Oh, you do, do you? Excuse me, my dearest, while I kick the stuffing out of this parvenu.’ With that, Vieri had thrust Cristina aside and lunged at Ezio with his right fist. Ezio parried easily and stepped aside, tripping Vieri as the momentum of his attack carried him forward, sending him sprawling in the dust.

‘Had enough, friend?’ said Ezio mockingly. But Vieri was on his feet in an instant, and came towards him in a rage, fists flailing. He’d got one hard blow in to the side of Ezio’s jaw, but Ezio warded off a left hook and got two of his own in, one to the stomach and, as Vieri bent double, another to his jaw. Ezio had turned to Cristina to check that she was all right. Winded, Vieri backed off, but his hand flew to his dagger. Cristina saw the movement and gave an involuntary cry of alarm as Vieri brought the dagger plunging down towards Ezio’s back, but, warned by the cry, Ezio had turned in the nick of time and seized Vieri firmly by the wrist, wrenching the dagger away from him. It fell to the ground. The two young men stood face to face, breathing hard.

‘Is that the best you can do?’ Ezio said through gritted teeth.

‘Shut your mouth or by God I’ll kill you!’

Ezio laughed. ‘I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised to see you trying to force yourself on a nice girl who clearly thinks you’re a complete ball of dung – given the way your pappa tries to force his banking interests on Florence!’

‘You fool! It’s your father who needs to be taught a lesson in humility!’

‘It’s time you Pazzi stopped slandering us. But then, you’re all mouth and no fist.’

Vieri’s lip was bleeding badly. He wiped it with his sleeve. ‘You’ll pay for this – you and your whole breed. I won’t forget this, Auditore!’ He spat at Ezio’s feet, stooped to retrieve his dagger, then turned, and ran. Ezio had watched him go.

He remembered all this, standing there on the church tower and looking across at Cristina’s house. He remembered the elation he’d felt as he’d turned back to Cristina and seen a new warmth in her eyes as she’d thanked him.

‘Are you all right, *signorina*?’ he’d said.

‘I am now – thanks to you.’ She’d hesitated, her voice still trembling with fear. ‘You asked me my name – well, it’s Cristina. Cristina Calfucci.’

Ezio bowed. ‘I am honoured to meet you, Signorina Cristina. Ezio Auditore.’

‘Do you know that man?’

‘Vieri? Our paths have crossed now and then. But our families have no reason to like one another.’

‘I never want to see him again.’

‘If I can help it, you won’t.’

She smiled shyly, then said, ‘Ezio, you have my gratitude – and because of that, I am prepared to give you a second chance, after your bad start!’ She laughed gently, then kissed him on the cheek before disappearing into her mansion.

The small crowd that had inevitably gathered had given Ezio a round of applause. He had bowed, smilingly, but as he’d turned away he’d known that he might have made a new friend, but he had also made an implacable enemy.

‘Let Cristina sleep,’ Federico said again, drawing Ezio back from his reverie.

‘Time enough for that – later,’ he replied. ‘I must see her.’

‘All right, if you must – I’ll try to cover for you with Father. But watch yourself – Vieri’s men may still be about.’ With that, Federico shinned down the tower to the roof, and bounded off that into a hay-wagon parked in the street which led home.

Ezio watched him go, then decided to emulate his brother. The hay-wain looked very far below him, but he remembered what he’d been taught, controlled his breathing, calmed himself, and concentrated.

Then he flew into the air, taking the greatest leap of his life so far. For an instant he thought he might have misjudged his aim, but he calmed his own momentary panic and landed safely in the hay. A true leap of faith! A little breathless, but exhilarated at his success, Ezio swung himself into the street.

The sun was just appearing over the eastern hills but there were still very few people about. Ezio was just about to start off in the direction of Cristina’s mansion when he heard echoing footsteps and, desperately trying to conceal himself, he shrank into the shadows of the church porch and held his breath. It was none other than Vieri and two of the Pazzi guards who rounded the corner.

‘We’d better give up, chief,’ said the senior guard. ‘They’ve long gone by now.’

‘I know they’re here somewhere,’ snapped Vieri. ‘I can practically smell them.’ He and his men made a circuit of the church square but showed no sign of moving on. The sunlight was shrinking the shadows. Ezio cautiously crept into the shelter of the hay again and lay there for what seemed an age, impatient to be on his way. Once, Vieri passed so close that Ezio could practically smell *him*, but at last he motioned his men with an angry gesture to move on. Ezio lay still for a while longer, then climbed down and let out a long sigh of relief. He dusted himself off, and quickly covered the short distance that separated him from Cristina, praying that no one in her household would yet be stirring.

The mansion was still silent, though Ezio guessed that servants would be preparing the kitchen fires at the back. He knew which Cristina's window was, and threw a handful of gravel up at her shutters. The noise seemed deafening and he waited, heart in mouth. Then the shutters opened and she appeared on the balcony. Her nightdress revealed the delicious contours of her body as he gazed up at her. He was at once lost in desire.

'Who is it?' she called softly.

He stood back so she could see him. 'Me!'

Cristina sighed, though in a not unfriendly way. 'Ezio! I might have known.'

'May I come up, *mia colomba*?'

She glanced over her shoulder before answering in a whisper. 'All right. But just for a minute.'

'That's all I need.'

She grinned. 'Indeed?'

He was confused. 'No – sorry – I didn't mean it quite like that! Let me show you…' Looking round himself to make sure the street was still deserted, he gained a foothold in one of the large iron rings set into the grey stonework of the house for tethering horses, and hoisted himself up, finding relatively easy handholds and footholds in the rusticated masonry. In two winks of an eye he had hoisted himself over the balustrade and she was in his arms.

'Oh, Ezio!' she sighed as they kissed. 'Look at your head. What have you been doing this time?'

'It's nothing. A scratch.' Ezio paused, smiling. 'Perhaps now I'm up, I could also come in?' he said gently.

'Where?'

He was all innocence. 'To your bedchamber, of course.'

'Well, perhaps – if you're sure a minute is all you need…'

Their arms around each other, they went through the double doors into the warm light of Cristina's room.

An hour later, they were awakened by the sunlight streaming in through the windows, the bustling noises of carts and people in the street, and – worst of all – the sound of Cristina's father's voice as he opened the bedroom door.

'Cristina,' he was saying. 'Time to get up, girl! Your tutor will be here at any – What the devil? Son of a bitch!'

Ezio kissed Cristina, quickly but hard. 'Time to go, I think,' he said, seizing his clothes and darting to the window. He shinned down the wall and was already pulling on his suit when Antonio Calfucci appeared on the balcony above. He was in a white rage.

‘*Perdonate, Messere*,’ Ezio offered.

‘I’ll give you *perdonate, Messere*,’ yelled Calfucci. ‘Guards! Guards! Get after that *cimice*! Bring me his head! And I want his *coglioni* as well!’

‘I’ve said I’m sorry –’ Ezio began, but already the gates of the mansion were opening and the Calfucci bodyguards came rushing out, swords drawn. Now more or less dressed, Ezio set off at a run down the street, dodging wagons and pushing past citizens on his way, wealthy businessmen in solemn black, merchants in browns and reds, humbler folk in homespun tunics and, once, a church procession which he collided with so unexpectedly that he all but tipped over the statue of the Virgin the black-cowled monks were carrying. At last, after ducking down alleys and leaping over walls, he stopped and listened. Silence. Not even the shouts and curses that had followed him from the general population could be heard any more. As for the guards, he’d shaken them off, he was sure of that.

He only hoped Signor Calfucci hadn’t recognized him. Cristina wouldn’t betray him, he could be sure of that. Besides, she could run rings round her father, who adored her. And even if he did find out, Ezio reflected, he wouldn’t be a bad match. His father ran one of the biggest banking houses in town, and one day it might be bigger than that of the Pazzi or even – who knew? – of the Medici.

Using back streets, he made his way home. The first to meet him was Federico, who looked at him gravely and shook his head ominously. ‘You’re in for it now,’ he said. ‘Don’t say I didn’t warn you.’

2

The office of Giovanni Auditore was on the first floor, and overlooked the gardens behind the palazzo through two sets of double windows which opened on to one broad balcony. The room was panelled in dark, scrolled oak, whose severity was scarcely mitigated by the ornate plasterwork of the ceiling. Two desks faced each other in the room, the larger of which belonged to Giovanni, and the walls were lined with bookcases stuffed with ledgers and parchment scrolls from which heavy red seals dangled. The room was designed to say to any visitor: here you will find opulence, respectability and trust. As head of the Auditore International Bank, which specialized in loans to the kingdoms of Germania within what was notionally at least a Holy Roman Empire, Giovanni Auditore was well aware of the weighty and responsible position he held. He hoped his two older sons would make haste to come to their senses and help him shoulder the burdens he had inherited from his own father, but he could see no sign of that yet. Nevertheless…

He glowered across the room at his middle son from his seat at his desk. Ezio stood near the other desk, vacated by Giovanni's secretary to give father and son the privacy they required for what Ezio feared would be a very painful interview. It was now early afternoon. He'd been dreading the summons all morning, though he'd also used the time to snatch a couple of hours of necessary sleep and smarten himself up. He guessed his father had wanted to give him those opportunities before carpeting him.

'Do you think me blind and deaf, my son?' Giovanni was thundering. 'Do you think I haven't heard all about the fight with Vieri de' Pazzi and his lot down by the bridge last night? Sometimes, Ezio, I think you're not much better than he is, and the Pazzi make for dangerous enemies.' Ezio was about to speak, but his

father held up a cautionary hand. ‘Kindly allow me to finish!’ He took a breath. ‘And as if that weren’t bad enough, you take it upon yourself to chase after Cristina Calfucci, the daughter of one of the most successful merchants in all Tuscany, and, not content with that, to tumble her in her own bed! It’s intolerable! Don’t you consider our family’s reputation at all?’ He paused, and Ezio was surprised to see the ghost of a twinkle in his eye. ‘You do realize what all this means, don’t you?’ continued Giovanni. ‘You do realize who you remind me of, don’t you?’

Ezio bowed his head, but then he was surprised when his father got up, crossed the room to him and put an arm round his shoulder, grinning from ear to ear.

‘You little devil! You remind me of myself when I was your age!’ But Giovanni immediately became grave again. ‘Don’t think, however, that I wouldn’t punish you without mercy if I didn’t have sore need of you here. If I didn’t, mark my words, I’d send you off to your Uncle Mario and get him to recruit you into his *condottieri* squadron. That’d knock some sense into you! But I have to count on you, and although you don’t seem to have the brains to see it, we’re passing through a crucial time in our city. How’s your head feeling? I see you’ve taken the bandage off.’

‘Much better, father.’

‘So I assume nothing’s going to interfere with the work I have lined up for you for the rest of the day?’

‘I promise you, Father.’

‘It’s a promise you’d better keep.’ Giovanni returned to his desk and, from a compartment, drew a letter bearing his own seal and passed it to his son, together with two parchment documents in a leather case. ‘I want you to deliver these to Lorenzo de’ Medici at his bank without any delay.’

‘May I ask what it concerns, Father?’

‘As for the documents, you may not. But it’d be as well for you to know that the letter brings Lorenzo up to date on our dealings with Milan. I spent all this morning preparing it. This must go no farther, but if I don’t give you my trust, you’ll never learn responsibility. There’s a rumour of a plot against Duke Galeazzo – a nasty piece of work, I grant you, but Florence can’t afford to have Milan destabilized.’

‘Who’s involved?’

Giovanni looked at his son narrowly: ‘They say the principal conspirators are Giovanni Lampugnani, Gerolamo Olgiati and Carlo Visconti; but it looks as if our own dear Francesco de’ Pazzi is involved as well, and above all, there’s a plan afoot which seems to encompass more than just the politics of two city-

states. The Gonfaloniere here has taken Francesco into custody for the moment but the Pazzi won't like that at all.' Giovanni stopped himself. 'There. I've already told you far too much. Make sure this gets to Lorenzo quickly – I've heard he's leaving for Careggi very soon to take some country air, and while the cat's away…'

'I'll get it there as fast as possible.'

'Good boy. Go now!'

Ezio set off on his own, using the back streets as far as possible, never thinking that Vieri might still be out looking for him. But suddenly, in a quiet street within minutes of the Medici Bank, there he stood, blocking Ezio's path. Trying to double back, Ezio found more of Vieri's men blocking his retreat. He turned again. 'Sorry, my little piglet,' he shouted at Vieri, 'but I simply don't have time to give you another drubbing now.'

'It's not me that's going to get a drubbing,' Vieri shouted back. 'You're cornered; but don't worry – I'll send a nice wreath for your funeral.'

The Pazzi men were closing in. No doubt Vieri knew of his father's imprisonment by now. Ezio looked around desperately. The street's tall houses and walls hemmed him in. Slinging the satchel containing the precious documents securely round his body, he selected the most likely house within his reach and sprang at its wall, gripping the rough-hewn stone with both hands and feet before scaling up to the roof. Once there, he paused a moment to look down at Vieri's irate face. 'I haven't even got time to piss on you,' he said, and scampered away along the rooftop as fast as he could, dropping to the ground with new-found agility as soon as he was clear of his pursuers.

A few moments later, he was at the doors of the bank. He entered and recognized Boetio, one of Lorenzo's most trusted servants. Here was a stroke of luck. Ezio hurried up to him.

'Hey, Ezio! What brings you here in such a hurry?'

'Boetio, there is no time to waste. I have letters here from my father for Lorenzo.'

Boetio looked serious, and spread his hands. '*Ahimè*, Ezio! You're too late. He's gone to Careggi.'

'Then you must make sure he gets these as soon as possible.'

'I'm sure he hasn't gone for more than a day or so. In these times…'

'I'm beginning to find out about these times! Make sure he gets them, Boetio, and in confidence! As soon as possible!'

When he had returned to his own palazzo, he made his way quickly to his father's office, ignoring both the amiable backchat from Federico, who was lazing under a tree in the garden, and the attempts of his father's secretary,

Giulio, to prevent him from passing the closed door of Giovanni's inner sanctum. There, he discovered his father in deep conversation with the Chief Justice of Florence, the Gonfaloniere Uberto Alberti. No surprise there, for the two men were old friends, and Ezio treated Alberti as he would an uncle. But he'd caught expressions of deep seriousness on their faces.

'Ezio, my boy!' said Uberto, genially. 'How are you? Out of breath as usual, I see.'

Ezio looked urgently at his father.

'I've been trying to calm your father down,' continued Uberto. 'There's been a lot of trouble, you know; but –' he turned to Giovanni and his tone became more earnest, '– the threat is ended.'

'Have you delivered the documents?' Giovanni asked, crisply.

'Yes, father. But Duke Lorenzo had already left.'

Giovanni frowned. 'I hadn't anticipated his leaving so soon.'

'I left them with Boetio,' said Ezio. 'He'll get them to him as soon as possible.'

'That may not be soon enough,' said Giovanni, darkly.

Uberto patted him on the back. 'Look,' he said. 'It can only mean a day or two. We have Francesco under lock and key. What could possibly happen in such a short time?'

Giovanni seemed partially reassured, but it was clear that the two men had more to discuss, and that Ezio's presence wasn't desired.

'Go and find your mother and your sister,' said Giovanni. 'You should spend time with some of the rest of the family other than Federico, you know! And rest that head of yours – I'll have need of you again later.' And with a wave of his father's hand, Ezio was dismissed.

He wandered through the house, nodding greetings to one or two of the family's servants, and to Giulio, who was hurrying back to the bank office from somewhere, a sheaf of papers in his hand and looking, as usual, haunted by all the business he carried in his head. Ezio waved to his brother, still lounging in the garden, but felt no desire to join him. Besides, he'd been told to keep his mother and sister company, and he knew better than to disobey his father, especially after their discussion earlier in the day.

He found his sister sitting alone in the loggia, a neglected book of Petrarch in her hands. That figured. He knew she was in love.

'*Ciao*, Claudia,' he said.

'*Ciao*, Ezio. Where *have* you been?'

Ezio spread his hands. 'I've been running a business errand for Father.'

'That's not all, I hear,' she retorted, but her smile was faint and automatic.

‘Where’s Mother?’

Claudia sighed. ‘She’s gone to see that young painter they’re all talking about. You know, the one who’s just finished his apprenticeship with Verrocchio.’

‘Really?’

‘Don’t you pay attention to anything that goes on in this house? She’s commissioned some paintings from him. She believes that they’ll be a good investment in time.’

‘That’s our mother for you!’

But Claudia didn’t respond, and for the first time Ezio became fully aware of the sadness in her face. It made her look much older than her sixteen years.

‘What’s the matter, *sorellina*?’ he asked, sitting on the stone bench beside her.

She sighed, and looked at him with a rueful smile. ‘It’s Duccio,’ she said at last.

‘What about him?’

Her eyes filled with tears. ‘I’ve found out that he’s being unfaithful to me.’

Ezio frowned. Duccio was practically engaged to Claudia, and even though there hadn’t yet been any formal announcement…

‘Who told you that?’ he asked, putting an arm round her.

‘The other girls.’ She wiped her eyes and looked at him. ‘I thought they were my friends, but I think they enjoyed telling me.’

Ezio stood up angrily. ‘Then they’re little better than harpies! You’re better off without them.’

‘But I loved him!’

Ezio took a moment before replying. ‘Are you sure? Maybe you only thought you did. How do you feel now?’

Claudia’s eyes were dry. ‘I’d like to see him suffer, even if only a little. He’s really hurt me, Ezio.’

Ezio looked at his sister, looked at the sadness in her eyes, a sadness suffused with not a little flare of anger. His heart steeled.

‘I think I’ll pay him a visit.’

Duccio Dovizi wasn’t at home, but the housekeeper told Ezio where to find him. Ezio made his way across the Ponte Vecchio and westward along the south bank of the Arno to the church of San Jacopo Soprano. There were some secluded gardens nearby, where lovers occasionally kept their trysts. Ezio, whose blood was boiling on behalf of his sister, yet needed more proof of Duccio’s infidelity than hearsay, began to think that he was about to get it.

Sure enough, he soon caught sight of the blond young man, dressed to kill, sitting on a bench overlooking the river, his arm round a dark-haired girl he

didn’t recognize. He made his way forward cautiously.

‘Darling, it’s beautiful,’ the girl was saying, holding out her hand. Ezio saw the flash of a diamond ring.

‘Nothing but the best for you, *amore*,’ Duccio purred, pulling her towards him for a kiss.

But the girl pulled back. ‘Not so fast. You can’t just buy me. We haven’t been seeing each other that long, and I’ve heard you’ve been promised to Claudia Auditore.’

Duccio spat. ‘It’s over. Anyway, Father says I can do better than an Auditore.’ He clamped her bottom in his hand. ‘You, for example!’

‘*Birbante!* Let’s walk a bit.’

‘I can think of something that’d be much more fun,’ said Duccio, putting his hand between her legs.

That was enough for Ezio. ‘Hey, *lurido porco*,’ he snapped.

Duccio was taken completely by surprise, and spun round, releasing his hold on the girl. ‘Hey, Ezio, my friend,’ he cried, but there was nervousness in his voice. How much had Ezio seen? ‘I don’t think you’ve met my… cousin?’

Ezio, enraged at the treachery, stepped forward and punched his former friend full in the face. ‘Duccio, you should be ashamed of yourself! You insult my sister, parading around with this… this *puttana*!’

‘Who are you calling a *puttana*?’ the girl snarled, but she got to her feet and backed off.

‘I should have thought even a girl like you could do better than this arsehole,’ Ezio told her. ‘Do you really think he’s going to make you into a lady?’

‘Don’t you talk to her like that,’ Duccio hissed. ‘At least she’s more generous with her favours than your tight-assed little sister. But I guess she’s got a hole as dry as a nun’s. Pity, I could have taught her a thing or two. But there again –’

Ezio interrupted him coldly. ‘You’ve broken her heart, Duccio –’

‘Have I? What a shame.’

‘– Which is why I am going to break your arm.’

The girl screamed at this, and fled. Ezio seized the whining Duccio and forced the young gallant’s right arm over the edge of the stone bench on which he’d been sitting with a hard-on only moments before. He pushed the forearm against the stone until Duccio’s whining turned to tears.

‘Stop it, Ezio! I beg you! I’m my father’s only son!’

Ezio looked at him with contempt, and released him. Duccio fell to the ground and rolled over, nursing his bruised arm and whimpering, his fine clothes torn and besmirched.

‘You’re not worth the effort,’ Ezio told him. ‘But if you don’t want me to change my mind about that arm of yours, stay away from Claudia. And stay away from me.’

After the incident, Ezio walked a long way home, wandering along the riverbank until he’d almost reached the fields. When he turned back, the shadows were lengthening, but his mind was calmer. It would never become him as a man, he told himself, to allow his anger ever fully to rule him.

Close to his house, he caught sight of his younger brother, whom he hadn’t seen since the morning of the previous day. He greeted the lad warmly. ‘*Ciao*, Petruccio. What are you up to? Have you given your tutor the slip? And anyway, isn’t it past your bedtime?’

‘Don’t be silly. I’m practically grown-up. In a few years’ time, I’ll be able to knock the stuffing out of you!’ The brothers grinned at each other. Petruccio was holding a carved pearwood box close to his chest. It was open, and Ezio noticed a handful of white and brown feathers in it. ‘They’re eagle’s feathers,’ explained the boy. He pointed to the top of the tower of a nearby building. ‘There’s an old nest up there. The young must have fledged and gone. I can see plenty more feathers caught in the stonework.’ Petruccio looked at his brother pleadingly. ‘Ezio, would you mind getting a few more for me?’

‘Well, what do you want them for?’

Petruccio looked down. ‘It’s a secret,’ he said.

‘If I get them for you, will you go in? It’s late.’

‘Yes.’

‘Promise?’

‘Promise.’

‘All right, then.’ Ezio thought, well, I’ve done Claudia a favour today, no reason why I shouldn’t do one for Petruccio as well.

Climbing the tower was tricky, as its stone was smooth and he had to concentrate to find grips and toeholds in the joints between its stones. Higher up, ornamental mouldings helped as well. In the end, it took him half an hour, but he managed to gather fifteen more feathers – all that he could see – and brought them back to Petruccio.

‘You missed one,’ said Petruccio, pointing up.

‘Bed!’ growled his brother.

Petruccio fled.

Ezio hoped their mother would be pleased with the gift. It didn’t take much to fathom Petruccio’s secrets.

He smiled as he entered the house himself.

3

The following morning Ezio woke late, but found to his relief that his father had no immediate business for him to see to. He wandered into the garden, where he found his mother overseeing work on her cherry trees, from which the blossom was just beginning to fade. She smiled when she saw him, and beckoned him over. Maria Auditore was a tall, dignified woman in her early forties, her long black hair braided under a pure white muslin cap edged with the black and gold colours of the family.

‘Ezio! *Buon’ giorno*.’

‘*Madre*.’

‘How are you? Better, I hope.’ Gently, she touched the wound on his head.

‘I’m fine.’

‘Your father said you should rest as long as you could.’

‘I have no need of rest, Mamma!’

‘Well, at any rate there will be no excitement for you this morning. Your father has asked that I take care of you. I know what you’ve been up to.’

‘I don’t know what you mean.’

‘Don’t play games with me, Ezio. I know about your fight with Vieri.’

‘He has been spreading foul stories about our family. I could not let that go unpunished.’

‘Vieri’s under pressure, the more so since his father was arrested.’ She paused thoughtfully. ‘Francesco de’ Pazzi may be many things, but I never would have imagined him capable of joining a plot to murder a duke.’

‘What will happen to him?’

‘There’ll be a trial. I imagine your father may be a key witness, when our own Duke Lorenzo returns.’

Ezio looked restless.

‘Don’t worry, you’ve nothing to fear. And I’m not going to ask you to do anything you wouldn’t like – in fact, I want you to accompany me on an errand I have to run. It won’t take long, and I think you may even find it enjoyable.’

‘I’ll be happy to help you, Mamma.’

‘Come, then. It’s not far.’

They left the palazzo on foot together, arm in arm, and walked in the direction of the cathedral, to the small quarter near it where many of the artists of Florence had their workshops and studios. Some, like those of Verrocchio and the rising star Alessandro di Moriano Filipepi, who’d already acquired the nickname Botticelli, were large, busy places, where assistants and apprentices were busy grinding colours and mixing pigments, others, humbler. It was at the door of one of these that Maria halted and knocked. It was opened immediately by a handsome, well-dressed young man, almost dandified but athletic-looking, with a shock of dark brown hair and a luxuriant beard. He might have been six or seven years older than Ezio.

‘Madonna Auditore! Welcome! I’ve been expecting you.’

‘Leonardo, *buon’ giorno*.’ The two exchanged formal kisses. This artist must be well in with my mother, thought Ezio, but already he liked the look of the man. ‘This is my son, Ezio,’ continued Maria.

The artist bowed. ‘Leonardo da Vinci,’ he said. ‘*Molto onorato, signore*.’

‘Maestro.’

‘Not quite that – yet,’ smiled Leonardo. ‘But what am I thinking of? Come in, come in! Wait here, I’ll see if my assistant can find some wine for you while I go and get your paintings.’

The studio was not large, but the clutter in it made it look even smaller than it was. Tables were heaped with the skeletons of birds and small mammals, while jars filled with colourless fluid contained organic objects of one kind or another, though Ezio was hard put to it to recognize any of them. A broad workbench at the back held some curious structures painstakingly crafted in wood, and two easels bore unfinished paintings whose tones were darker than usual, and whose outlines were less clearly defined. Ezio and Maria made themselves comfortable, and, emerging from an inner room, a handsome youth appeared with a tray bearing wine and small cakes. He served them, smiled shyly, and withdrew.

‘Leonardo’s very talented.’

‘If you say so, *Madre*. I know little of art.’ Ezio thought that his life would consist of following in his father’s footsteps, even though, deep within him, there was a rebellious and adventurous streak which he knew would sit ill in the

character of a Florentine banker. In any case, like his older brother, he saw himself as a man of action, not as an artist or a connoisseur.

‘You know, self-expression is a vital part of understanding life, and enjoying it to the full.’ She looked at him. ‘You should find an outlet yourself, my dear.’

Ezio was piqued. ‘I have plenty of outlets.’

‘I meant apart from tarts,’ retorted his mother matter-of-factly.

‘Mother!’ But Maria’s only answer to that was a shrug and a pursing of her lips. ‘It would be good if you could cultivate a man like Leonardo as a friend. I think he has a promising future ahead of him.’

‘From the look of this place, I’m inclined to disagree with you.’

‘Don’t be cheeky!’

They were interrupted by Leonardo’s return from his inner room, carrying two boxes. He set one down on the ground. ‘Do you mind carrying that one?’ he asked Ezio. ‘I’d ask Agniolo, but he has to stay and guard the shop. Also, I don’t think he’s strong enough for this kind of work, poor dear.’

Ezio stooped to pick up the box, and was surprised at how heavy it was. He almost dropped it.

‘Careful!’ warned Leonardo. ‘The paintings in there are delicate, and your mother’s just paid me good money for them!’

‘Shall we go?’ said Maria. ‘I can’t wait to hang them. I’ve selected places which I hope you’ll approve of,’ she added to Leonardo. Ezio baulked at this a little: was a fledgling artist really worth such deference?

As they walked, Leonardo chatted amiably, and Ezio found that despite himself he was won over by the other man’s charm. And yet there was something about him that he instinctively found disquieting, something he couldn’t quite put his finger on. A coolness? A sense of detachment from his fellow beings? Perhaps it was just that he had his head in the clouds, like so many other artists, or so Ezio was told. But Ezio felt an instant, instinctive respect for the man.

‘So, Ezio, what do you do?’ Leonardo asked him.

‘He works for his father,’ Maria replied.

‘Ah. A financier! Well, you were born in the right city for that!’

‘It’s a good city for artists too,’ said Ezio. ‘All those rich patrons.’

‘There are so many of us, though,’ grumbled Leonardo. ‘It’s hard to attract attention. That’s why I am so indebted to your mother. Mind you, she has a very discerning eye!’

‘Do you concentrate on painting?’ asked Ezio, thinking of the diversity he’d seen in the studio.

Leonardo looked thoughtful. ‘That’s a hard question. To tell the truth, I’m finding it difficult to settle down to anything, now I’m on my own. I adore painting, and I know I can do it, but… somehow I can see the end before I get there, and that makes it hard to finish things sometimes. I have to be pushed! But that’s not all. I often feel that my work lacks… I don’t know… purpose. Does that make any sense?’

‘You should have more faith in yourself, Leonardo,’ said Maria.

‘Thank you, but there are moments when I think I’d rather do more practical work, work that has a direct bearing on life. I want to understand life – how it works, how everything works.’

‘Then you’d have to be one hundred men in one,’ said Ezio.

‘If only I could be! I know what I want to explore: architecture, anatomy, engineering even. I don’t want to capture the world with my brush, I want to change it!’

He was so impassioned that Ezio was more impressed than irritated – the man clearly wasn’t boasting; if anything, he seemed almost tormented by the ideas that simmered within him. Next thing, thought Ezio, is that he’ll tell us he’s involved with music and poetry as well!

‘Do you want to put that down and rest for a moment, Ezio?’ Leonardo asked. ‘It might be a bit too heavy for you.’

Ezio gritted his teeth. ‘No, *grazie*. Anyway, we’re almost there.’

When they arrived at the Palazzo Auditore, he carried his box into the entrance hall and set it down as slowly and as carefully as his aching muscles would let him, and he was more relieved than he’d ever admit, even to himself.

‘Thank you, Ezio,’ said his mother. ‘I think we can manage very well without you now, though of course if you wish to come and help with the hanging of the pictures –’

‘Thank you, Mother – I think that’s a job best left to the two of you.’

Leonardo held out his hand. ‘It was very good to meet you, Ezio. I hope our paths cross again soon.’

‘*Anch’io*.’

‘You might just call one of the servants to give Leonardo a hand,’ Maria told him.

‘No,’ said Leonardo. ‘I prefer to take care of this myself. Imagine if someone dropped one of the boxes!’ And bending his knees, he hoisted the box Ezio had put down into the crook of his arm. ‘Shall we?’ he said to Maria.

‘This way,’ said Maria. “Goodbye, Ezio, I’ll see you at dinner this evening. Come, Leonardo.’

Ezio watched as they left the hall. This Leonardo was obviously one to respect.

After lunch, late in the afternoon, Giulio came hurrying (as he always did) to tell him that his father required his presence in the office. Ezio hastened to follow the secretary down the long oak-lined corridor that led to the back of the mansion.

'Ah, Ezio! Come in, my boy.' Giovanni's tone was serious and businesslike. He stood up behind his desk, on which two bulky letters lay, wrapped in vellum and sealed.

'They say Duke Lorenzo will return tomorrow or the day after at the latest,' said Ezio.

'I know. But there is no time to waste. I want you to deliver these to certain associates of mine, here in the city.' He pushed the letters across the desk.

'Yes, Father.'

'I also need you to retrieve a message which a carrier pigeon should have brought to the coop in the piazza at the end of the street. Try to make sure no one sees you fetch it.'

'I'll see to it.'

'Good. Come back here immediately you've finished. I have some important things I need to discuss with you.'

'Sir.'

'So, this time, behave. No scrapping this time.'

Ezio decided to tackle the pigeon coop first. Dusk was approaching, and he knew there'd be few people out at that time – a little later the square would be thronged with Florentines making their *passeggiata*. When he reached his goal he noticed some graffiti on the wall behind and above the coop. He was puzzled: was it recent or had he just never been aware of it before? Carefully inscribed was a line he recognized from the Book of Ecclesiastes: HE THAT INCREASETH KNOWLEDGE INCREASETH SORROW. A little below this, someone had added in a ruder script: WHERE IS THE PROPHET?

But his mind soon returned to his task. He recognized the pigeon he was after instantly – it was the only one with a note attached to its leg. He detached it quickly and gently placed the bird back on its ledge, then he hesitated. Should he read the note? It wasn't sealed. Quickly he unrolled the little scroll and found it contained nothing but a name – that of Francesco de' Pazzi. Ezio shrugged. He supposed that would mean something more to his father than it did to him. Why the name of Vieri's father and one of the possible conspirators in a plot to topple the Duke of Milan – facts already known to Giovanni – should be of further significance was beyond him. Unless it signified some kind of confirmation.

But he had to hurry on with his work. Stashing the note in his belt-pouch, he made his way to the address on the first envelope. Its location surprised him, for it was in the red-light district. He'd been there often with Federico – before he had met Cristina, that is – but he had never felt comfortable there. He placed a hand on his dagger-hilt to reassure himself as he approached the dingy alley his father had indicated. The address turned out to be a low tavern, ill-lit and serving cheap Chianti in clay beakers.

At a loss about what to do next, for there seemed to be no one about, he was surprised by a voice at his side.

'You Giovanni's boy?'

He turned to confront a rough-looking man whose breath smelled of onions. He was accompanied by a woman who might once have been pretty, but it looked as if ten years on her back had rubbed most of any loveliness away. If it was left anywhere, it was in her clear, intelligent eyes.

'No, you idiot,' she said to the man. 'He just happens to look exactly like his dad.'

'You got something for us,' said the man, ignoring her. 'Give it here.'

Ezio hesitated. He checked the address. It was the right one.

'Hand it over, friend,' said the man, leaning closer. Ezio got a full blast of his breath. Did the man live on onions and garlic?

He placed the letter in the man's open hand, which closed round it immediately and transferred it to a leather pouch at his side.

'Good boy,' he said, and then smiled. Ezio was surprised to see that the smile gave his face a certain – surprising – nobility. But not his words. 'And don't worry,' he added. 'We ain't contagious.' He paused to glance at the woman. 'At least, *I* ain't!'

The woman laughed and punched his arm. Then they were gone.

Ezio made his way out of the alley with relief. The address on the second letter directed him to a street just west of the Baptistry. A much better district, but a quiet one at this time of day. He hastened across town.

Waiting for him under an arch which spanned the street was a burly man who looked like a soldier. He was dressed in what looked like leather country clothes, but he smelled clean and fresh, and he was cleanshaven.

'Over here,' he beckoned.

'I have something for you,' said Ezio. 'From –'

'– Giovanni Auditore?' The man spoke little above a whisper.

'*Sì*.'

The man glanced around, up and down the street. Only a lamplighter was visible, some distance away. 'Were you followed?'

‘No – why should I have been?’

‘Never mind. Give me the letter. Quickly.’

Ezio handed it over.

‘Things are hotting up,’ said the man. ‘Tell your father they’re making a move tonight. He should make plans to get to safety.’

Ezio was taken aback. ‘What? What are you talking about?’

‘I’ve already said too much. Hurry home.’ And the man melted into the shadows.

‘Wait!’ Ezio called after him. ‘What do you mean? Come back!’

But the man had gone.

Ezio walked quickly up the street to the lamplighter. ‘What time is it?’ he asked. The man screwed up his eyes and looked at the sky. ‘Must be an hour since I came on duty,’ he said. ‘Makes it about the twentieth hour.’

Ezio made a quick calculation. He must have left his palazzo two hours earlier, and it would take him perhaps twenty minutes to reach home again. He took off at a run. Some awful premonition caught at his soul.

As soon as he came within sight of the Auditore mansion, he knew something was wrong. There were no lights anywhere, and the great front doors stood open. He quickened his pace, calling as he ran: ‘Father! Federico!’

The great hall of the palazzo stood dark and empty, but there was enough light for Ezio to see tables overturned, chairs smashed, broken crockery and glassware. Someone had torn Leonardo’s paintings from the walls and slashed them with a knife. From the darkness beyond, he could hear the sound of sobbing – a woman sobbing: his mother!

He started to make his way towards the sound when a shadow moved behind him, something raised above its head. Ezio twisted round and seized a heavy silver candlestick which someone was bringing down on his head. He gave a savage wrench and his attacker let go of the candlestick with a cry of alarm. He tossed the candlestick away, out of reach, grabbed the arm of his assailant, and pulled the person towards what light there was. There was murder in his heart, and already his dagger was out.

‘Oh! *Ser* Ezio! It’s you! Thank God!’

Ezio recognized the voice, and now the face, of the family housekeeper, Annetta, a feisty countrywoman who’d been with the family for years.

‘What has *happened*?’ he asked Annetta, taking both her wrists in his hands and almost shaking her in his anguish and panic.

‘They came – the city guards. They’ve arrested your father and Federico – they even took little Petruccio, they tore him from your mother’s arms!’

‘Where is my mother? Where is Claudia?’

‘Here we are,’ came a shaky voice from the shadows. Claudia emerged, her mother leaning on her arm. Ezio righted a chair for his mother to sit on. In the dim light, he could see that Claudia was bleeding, her clothes dirty and torn. Maria did not acknowledge him. She sat on the chair, keening and rocking. In her hands she clutched the little pearwood box of feathers Petruccio had given her not two days – a lifetime – before.

‘My God, Claudia! Are you all right?’ He looked at her and anger flooded through him. ‘Did they – ?’

‘No – I’m all right. They roughed me up a little because they thought I could tell them where you were. But Mother… Oh, Ezio, they’ve taken Father and Federico and Petruccio to the Palazzo Vecchio!’

‘Your mother’s in shock,’ said Annetta. ‘When she resisted them, they –’ She broke off. ‘*Bastardi!*’

Ezio thought quickly. ‘It’s not safe here. Is there somewhere you can take them, Annetta?’

‘Yes, yes… to my sister’s. They’ll be safe there.’ Annetta barely managed to get the words out, the fear and anguish choking her voice.

‘We must move fast. The guards will almost certainly come back for me. Claudia, Mother – there’s no time to waste. Don’t take anything, just go with Annetta. Now! Claudia, let Mamma lean on you.’

He escorted them out of their stricken home, still in shock himself, and helped them on their way before leaving them in the capable hands of the loyal Annetta, who had begun to regain her composure. Ezio’s mind raced with all the implications, his world rocked by the terrible turn of events. Desperately, he tried to assess all that had happened, and just what he must do now, what he must do to save his father and brothers… Straight away, he knew that he had to find some way of seeing his father, finding out what had brought on this attack, this outrage to his family. But the Palazzo Vecchio! They’d have put his kinsmen in the two small cells in the tower, of that he was sure. Maybe there’d be a chance… But the place was fortified like a castle keep; and there’d be a redoubtable guard placed on it, tonight of all nights.

Forcing himself to be calm and to think clearly, he slipped through the streets to the Piazza della Signoria, hugging its walls, and looking up. Torches burned from the battlements and from the top of the tower, illuminating the giant red fleur-de-lys that was the city’s emblem, and the great clock at the tower’s base. Higher up, squinting to see more clearly, Ezio thought he could discern the dim light of a taper in the small barred window near the top. There were guards posted outside the palazzo’s great double doors, and more on the battlements.

But there were none that Ezio could see at the top of the tower, whose battlements anyway were above the window he needed to reach.

He skirted the square away from the palazzo and found his way to the narrow street which led off the piazza, along the palazzo's north side. Fortunately, there were still a reasonable number of people about, strolling and enjoying the evening air. It seemed to Ezio that he suddenly existed in another world from theirs, that he had been cut off from the society he had swum in like a fish until only three or four short hours ago. He bristled at the thought that life could still continue in its even routine for all these people, while that of his own family had been shattered. Again, he felt his heart swell with an almost overwhelming rush of anger and fear. But then he turned his mind firmly back to the work in hand, and a look of steel crossed his face.

The wall rising above him was sheer and giddyingly high, but it was in darkness and that would be to his advantage. Moreover, the stones of which the palazzo was constructed were rough-hewn, so he would have plenty of handholds and footholds to aid him in his ascent. One problem would be any guards posted on the north-side battlements, but he'd have to deal with that when he came to it. He hoped that most would be grouped along the west-facing main façade of the building.

Taking a breath and glancing round – there was no one else in this dark street – he gave a leap, took a firm hold of the wall, gripped with his toes in their soft leather boots, and began to scale upwards.

Once he'd reached the battlements he dropped to a crouch, the tendons in his calves straining with tension. There were two guards here, but they had their backs to him, looking towards the lighted square beneath. Ezio stayed motionless for a moment, until it became clear that any sound he'd made had not alerted them to his presence. Staying low, he darted towards them and then struck, drawing them back, one hand around each of their necks, using their own weight and the element of surprise to bring them down on their backs. In barely a heartbeat, he had their helmets off and smashed their heads together violently – they were unconscious before they could register any surprise on their faces. If that hadn't worked, Ezio knew he would have cut their throats without a second's hesitation.

He paused again, breathing hard. Now for the tower. This was of more smoothly trimmed stone, and the going was hard. What's more, he had to climb round from the north to the west side of it, where the cell window was. He prayed that no one in the square or on the battlements would look up. He didn't fancy being brought down by a crossbow bolt after having got so far.

The corner where the north and west walls met was hard and unpromising, and for a moment Ezio clung there, frozen, looking for a handhold that didn't seem to exist. He looked down, and saw far beneath him one of the guards on the battlements looking up. He could see the pale face clearly. He could see the man's eyes. He pressed himself to the wall. In his dark clothing he'd be as conspicuous as a cockroach on a white tablecloth. But, inexplicably, the man lowered his gaze and continued his patrol. Had he seen him? Had he not been able to believe what he'd seen? Ezio's throat thumped with the strain. Only able to relax after a long minute had passed, he breathed once more.

After a monumental effort he arrived at his goal, grateful for the narrow ledge on which he could just perch as he peered into the narrow cell beyond the window. God is merciful, he thought, as he recognized the figure of his father, his back turned towards him, apparently reading by the thin light of a taper.

'Father!' he called softly.

Giovanni spun round. 'Ezio! In God's name, how did you –'

'Never mind, Father.' As Giovanni approached, Ezio could see that his hands were bloody and bruised, and his face pale and drawn. 'My God, Father, what have they done to you?'

'I took a bit of a beating, but I'm all right. More importantly, what of your mother and sister?'

'Safe now.'

'With Annetta?'

'Yes.'

'God be praised.'

'What happened, Father? Were you expecting this?'

'Not as quickly as this. They arrested Federico and Petruccio too – I think they're in the cell behind this one. If Lorenzo had been here things would have been different. I should have taken precautions.'

'What are you talking about?'

'There's no time for that now!' Giovanni almost shouted. 'Now, listen to me: you must get back to our house. There's a hidden door in my office. There's a chest concealed in a chamber beyond it. Take *everything* you find inside it. Do you hear? *Everything!* Much of it will seem strange to you, but all of it is important.'

'Yes, Father.' Ezio shifted his weight slightly, still clinging for dear life to the bars that crossed the window. He didn't dare look down now, and he didn't know how much longer he could remain motionless.

'Among the contents you'll find a letter and with it some documents. You must take them without delay – tonight! – to *Messer* Alberti –'

‘The Gonfalionere?’

‘Exactly. Now, go!’

‘But, Father…’ Ezio struggled to get the words out, and, wishing that he could do more than just ferry documents, he stammered, ‘Are the Pazzi behind this? I read the note from the carrier pigeon. It said –’

But then Giovanni hushed him. Ezio could hear the key turning in the lock of the cell door.

‘They’re taking me for interrogation,’ said Giovanni grimly. ‘Get away before they discover you. My God, you’re a brave boy. You’ll be worthy of your destiny. Now, for the last time – go!’

Ezio edged himself off the ledge and clung to the wall out of sight as he heard his father being led away. He almost couldn’t bear to listen. Then he steeled himself for the climb down. He knew that descents are almost always harder than ascents, but even in the last forty-eight hours he’d gained plenty of experience of scaling up and down buildings. And now he clambered down the tower, slipping once or twice, but regaining his hold, until he had reached the battlements again, where the two guardsmen still lay where he had left them. Another stroke of luck! He’d knocked their heads together as hard as he could, but if they’d chanced to regain consciousness while he was up on the tower and raised the alarm… well, the consequences didn’t bear thinking about.

Indeed, there was no time to think of such things. He swung himself over the battlements and peered down. Time was of the essence. If he could see something down below which might break his fall, he might dare to leap. As his eyes adjusted to the gloom, he saw the awning of a deserted stall attached to the wall, far below. Should he risk it? If he succeeded, he’d gain a few precious minutes. If he failed, a broken leg would be the least of his problems. He would have to have faith in himself.

He took a deep breath and dived into the darkness.

From such a height the awning collapsed under his weight, but it had been firmly secured and gave just enough resistance to break his fall. He was winded, and he’d have a few bruised ribs in the morning, but he was down! And no alarm had been raised.

He shook himself and sped off in the direction of what only hours ago had been his home. When he reached it, he realized that in his haste his father had neglected to tell him how to locate the secret door. Giulio would know, but where was Giulio now?

Luckily there had been no guards lurking in the vicinity of the house, and he’d been able to gain access unchallenged. He had stopped for a minute, outside the house, almost unable to propel himself in through the darkness of the doorway –

it seemed that the house had changed, its sanctity defiled. Again, Ezio had to collect his thoughts, knowing that his actions were critical. His family depended on him now. He pressed on into his family home, into the dark. Shortly afterwards he stood in the centre of the office, eerily lit by a single candle, and looked about him.

The place had been turned over by the guards, who had clearly confiscated a large number of bank documents, and the general chaos of fallen bookcases, overturned chairs, drawers cast to the ground and scattered papers and books everywhere didn't make Ezio's task any easier. But he knew the office, his eyesight was keen, and he used his wits. The walls were thick, any could have a chamber concealed within them, but he made for the wall into which the large fireplace was set and started his search there, where the walls would be thickest, to contain the chimneypiece. Holding the candle close, and looking searchingly, while keeping an ear cocked for any sound of returning guards, finally, on the left-hand side of the great moulded mantel he thought he could discern the faint outline of a door set into the panelling. There had to be a means of opening it nearby. He looked carefully at the carved *colossi* which held the marble mantelpiece on their shoulders. The nose of the one on the left-hand side looked as if it had once been broken, and repaired, for there was a fine crack around its base. He touched the nose and found it to be slightly loose. Heart in mouth, he moved it gently, and the door swung inwards on silent spring-mounted hinges, revealing a stone-floored corridor which led to the left.

As he entered, his right foot encountered a flagstone which moved beneath it, and as it did so, oil-lamps set into the passageway's walls suddenly flared into life. It ran a short way, sloping slightly downwards, and terminated in a circular chamber decorated more in the style of Syria than Italy. Ezio's mind flashed on a picture which hung in his father's private study of the castle of Masyaf, once the seat of the ancient Order of Assassins. But he had no time to ponder whether or not this curious decor could be of any special significance. The room was unfurnished, and in its centre stood a large, iron-bound chest, securely sealed with two heavy locks. He looked around the room to see if a key might be anywhere, but aside from its ornamentation it was bare. Ezio was wondering if he'd have to return to the office, or make his way to his father's study, to search for one there, and if he'd have time to do so, when by chance his hand brushed against one of the locks, and at that, it sprang open. The other one opened as easily. Had his father given him some power he did not know of? Were the locks in some way programmed to respond to a certain person's touch? Mystery was piling on mystery, but there was no time to dwell on them now.

He opened the chest and saw that it contained a white hood, evidently old, and made of some perhaps woollen material which he didn't recognize. Something compelled him to put it on, and at once a strange power surged through him. He lowered the hood, but did not take it off.

The chest contained a leather bracer, a cracked dagger blade connected, instead of to a hilt, to a strange mechanism whose workings were beyond him, a sword, a page of vellum covered with symbols and letters and what looked like part of a plan, and the letter and documents his father had told him to take to Uberto Alberti. He gathered them all up, closed the chest, and retreated to his father's office, closing the secret door carefully behind him. In the office, he found a discarded document pouch of Giulio's and stashed the contents of the chest in it, slinging the pouch across his chest. He buckled on the sword. Not knowing what to make of this strange collection of objects, and not having time to reflect on why his father would keep such things in a secret chamber, he made his way cautiously back towards the main doors of the palazzo.

But, just as he entered the fore-courtyard, he saw two city guards on their way in. It was too late to hide. They had seen him.

'Halt!' one of them cried, and they both began advancing quickly towards him. There was no retreat. Ezio saw that they had already drawn their swords.

'What are you here for? To arrest me?'

'No,' said the one who had spoken first. 'Our orders are to kill you.' At that, the second guard rushed him.

Ezio drew his own sword as they closed in on him. It was a weapon he was unfamiliar with, but it felt light and capable in his hand, and it was as if he had used it all his life. He parried the first thrusts, right and left, both guards lunging at him at the same time. Sparks flew from all three swords, but Ezio felt his new blade hold firm, the edge biting and keen. Just as the second guard was bringing his sword down to sever Ezio's arm from his shoulder, Ezio feinted right, under the incoming blade. He shifted his balance from back to front foot, and lunged. The guard was caught off balance as his sword arm thudded harmlessly against Ezio's shoulder. Ezio used his own momentum to thrust his new sword up, piercing the man directly through the heart. Standing tall, Ezio rocked on the balls of his feet, raised his left foot and pushed the dead guard off his blade in time to swivel round to confront his companion. The other guard came forward with a roar, wielding a heavy sword. 'Prepare to die, *traditore*!'

'I am no traitor, nor is any member of my family.'

The guard swung at him, tearing at his left sleeve and drawing blood. Ezio winced, but only for a second. The guard pressed forward, seeing an advantage, and Ezio allowed him to lunge once more, then, stepping back, tripped him,

swinging his own sword unflinchingly and very hard at the man's neck as he fell, and severing his head from his shoulders before he hit the ground.

For a moment Ezio stood trembling in the sudden silence that followed the mêlée, breathing hard. These were the first killings of his life – or were they? – for he felt another, older life within him, a life which seemed to have years of experience in death-dealing.

The sensation frightened him. This night had seen him age far beyond his years – but this new sensation seemed to be the awakening of some darker force deep within him. It was something more than simply the effects of the harrowing experiences of the last few hours. His shoulders sagged as he made his way through the darkened streets to Alberti's mansion, starting at every sound, and looking behind him frequently. At last, on the edge of exhaustion but able somehow to bear up, he arrived at the Gonfaloniere's home. He looked up at the façade, and saw a dim light in one of the front windows. He knocked hard on the door with the pommel of his sword.

Receiving no answer, nervous and impatient, he knocked again, harder and louder. Still nothing.

But, at the third time of trying, a hatch in the door opened briefly, then closed. The door swung open almost immediately thereafter, and a suspicious armed servant admitted him. He blurted out his business and was conducted to a first-floor room where Alberti sat at a desk covered with papers. Beyond him, half-turned away and sitting in a chair by a dying fire, Ezio thought he could see another man, tall and powerful, but only part of his profile was visible, and that indistinctly.

'Ezio?' Alberti stood up, surprised. 'What are you doing here at this hour?'

'I… I don't…'

Alberti approached him and put a hand on his shoulder. 'Wait, child. Take a breath. Collect your thoughts.'

Ezio nodded. Now he felt safer, he also felt more vulnerable. The events of the evening and night since he had set out to deliver Giovanni's letters were catching up with him. From the brass pedestal clock on the desk he could see that it was close to midnight. Could it really only be twelve hours since Ezio the boy had gone with his mother to collect paintings from an artist's studio? Despite himself he felt close to tears. But he collected himself, and it was Ezio the man who spoke. 'My father and brothers have been imprisoned – I do not know on whose authority – my mother and sister are in hiding and our family seat is ransacked. My father enjoined me to deliver this letter and these papers to you…' Ezio drew the documents from his pouch.

‘Thank you.’ Alberti put on a pair of eyeglasses and took Giovanni’s letter to the light of the candle burning on his desk. There was no sound in the room apart from the ticking of the clock and the occasional soft crash as the embers of the fire collapsed on themselves. If there was another presence in the room, Ezio had forgotten it.

Alberti now turned his attention to the documents. He took some time over them, and finally placed one of them discreetly inside his black doublet. The others he put carefully to one side, apart from the other papers on his desk.

‘There’s been a terrible misunderstanding, my dear Ezio,’ he said, taking off his spectacles. ‘It’s true that allegations were laid – serious allegations – and that a trial has been scheduled for tomorrow morning. But it seems that someone may have been, perhaps for reasons of their own, overly zealous. But don’t worry. I’ll clear everything up.’

Ezio hardly dared to believe him. ‘How?’

‘The documents you’ve given me contain evidence of a conspiracy against your father and against the city. I’ll present these papers at the hearing in the morning, and Giovanni and your brothers will be released. I guarantee it.’

Relief flooded through the young man. He clasped the Gonfaloniere’s hand. ‘How can I thank you?’

‘The administration of justice is my job, Ezio. I take it very seriously, and –’ for a fraction of a second he hesitated, ‘– your father is one of my dearest friends.’ Alberti smiled. ‘But where are my manners? I haven’t even offered you a glass of wine.’ He paused. ‘And where will you spend the night? I still have some urgent business to attend to, but my servants will see that you have food and drink and a warm bed.’

At the time, Ezio didn’t know why he refused so kind an offer.

It was well after midnight by the time he left the Gonfaloniere’s mansion. Pulling up his hood again, he prowled through the streets trying to arrange his thoughts. Presently, he knew where his feet were taking him.

Once there, he climbed to the balcony with greater ease than he’d imagined possible – perhaps urgency lent strength to his muscles – and knocked gently on her shutters, calling quietly, ‘Cristina! *Amore!* Wake up! It’s me.’ He waited, silent as a cat, and listened. He could hear her stirring, rising. And then her voice, scared, on the other side of the shutters.

‘Who is it?’

‘Ezio.’

She opened the shutters swiftly. ‘What is it? What’s wrong?’

‘Let me come in. Please.’

Sitting on her bed, he told her the whole story.

‘I knew something was amiss,’ she said. ‘My father seemed troubled this evening. But it does sound as if all will be well.’

‘I need you to let me stay here tonight – don’t worry, I’ll be gone long before dawn – and I need to leave something with you for safekeeping.’ He unslung his pouch and placed it between them. ‘I must trust you.’

‘Oh, Ezio, of course you can.’

He fell into a troubled sleep, in her arms.

4

It was a grey and overcast morning – and the city felt oppressed with the muggy heat that was trapped by the overhanging cloud. Ezio arrived at the Piazza della Signoria and saw, to his intense surprise, that a dense crowd had gathered already. A platform had been erected, and on it was placed a table covered with a heavy brocade cloth bearing the arms of the city. Standing behind it were Uberto Alberti and a tall, powerfully built man with a beaky nose and careful, calculating eyes, dressed in robes of rich crimson – a stranger to Ezio, at least. But his attention was caught by the sight of the other occupants of the platform – his father, and his brothers, all in chains; and just beyond them stood a tall construction with a heavy crossbeam from which three nooses were suspended.

Ezio had arrived at the piazza in a mood of anxious optimism – had not the Gonfaloniere told him that all would be resolved this day? Now his feelings changed. Something was wrong – badly wrong. He tried to push his way forward, but could not press through the mob – he felt the claustrophobia threaten to overwhelm him. Desperately trying to calm down, to rationalise his actions, he paused, drew his hood close over his head, and adjusted the sword at his belt. Surely Alberti would not let him down? And all the time he noticed that the tall man, a Spaniard by his dress, his face and his complexion, was ranging the mass of people with those piercing eyes. Who was he? Why did he stir something in Ezio's memory? Had he seen him somewhere before?

The Gonfaloniere, resplendent in his robes of office, raised his arms to quieten the people, and instantly a hush fell over them.

'Giovanni Auditore,' said Alberti in a commanding tone which failed, to Ezio's acute ear, to conceal a note of fear. 'You and your accomplices stand accused of the crime of treason. Have you any evidence to counter this charge?'

Giovanni looked at once surprised and uneasy. ‘Yes, you have it all in the documents that were delivered to you last night.’

But Alberti said, ‘I know of no such documents, Auditore.’

Ezio saw at once that this was a show-trial, but he couldn’t understand what looked like deep treachery on Alberti’s part. He shouted, ‘It’s a lie!’ But his voice was drowned by the roar of the crowd. He struggled to get closer, shoving angry citizens aside, but there were too many of them, and he was trapped in their midst.

Alberti was speaking again: ‘The evidence against you has been amassed and examined. It is irrefutable. In the absence of any proof to the contrary, I am bound by my office to pronounce you and your accomplices, Federico and Petruccio, and – *in absentia* – your son Ezio – *guilty* of the crime you stand accused of.’ He paused as the crowd once more fell silent. ‘I hereby sentence you all to death, the sentence to be carried out immediately!’

The crowd roared again. At a signal from Alberti, the hangman prepared the nooses, while two of his assistants took first little Petruccio, who was fighting back tears, to the gallows. The rope was placed round his neck as he prayed rapidly and the attendant priest shook Holy Water on to his head. Then the executioner pulled a lever set into the scaffold, and the boy dangled, kicking the air until he was still. ‘No!’ mouthed Ezio, barely able to believe what he was seeing. ‘No, God, please no!’ But his words were choked in his throat, his loss overcoming all.

Federico was next, bellowing his innocence and that of his family, struggling in vain to break loose from the guards who wrestled him towards the gallows. Ezio, now beside himself, striving desperately forward again, saw a solitary tear roll down his father’s ashen cheek. Aghast, Ezio watched as his older brother and greatest friend jolted at the rope’s end – it took longer for him to leave the world than it had taken Petruccio, but at last he, too, was still, swaying from the gallows – you could hear the wooden crossbeam creak in the silence. Ezio fought with the disbelief within him – could this really be happening?

The crowd began to murmur, but then a firm voice stilled it. Giovanni Auditore was speaking. ‘It is you who are the traitor, Uberto. You, one of my closest associates and friends, in whom I entrusted my life! And I am a fool. I did not see that you are one of *them* !’ Here he raised his voice to a great cry of anguish and of rage. ‘You may take our lives this day, but mark this – we will have *yours* in return!’

He bowed his head and fell silent. A deep silence, interrupted only by the murmured prayers of the priest, followed as Giovanni Auditore walked with

dignity to the gallows and commended his soul to the last great adventure it would travel on.

Ezio was too shocked to feel grief at first. It was as if a great iron fist had slammed into him. But as the trap opened below Giovanni, he couldn't help himself. '*Father!*' he cried, his voice cracking.

Instantly the Spaniard's eyes were on him. Was there something supernatural about the man's vision, to pick him out in such a throng? As if in slow motion, Ezio saw the Spaniard lean towards Alberti, whisper something, and point.

'Guards!' shouted Alberti, pointing as well. 'There! That's another one of them! Seize him!'

Before the crowd could react and restrain him, Ezio muscled through it to its edge, smashing his fists into anyone who stood barring his way. A guard was already waiting for him. He snatched at Ezio, pulling back his hood. Acting now on some instinctive drive within him, Ezio wrenched free and drew his sword with one hand, grabbing the guard by the throat with the other. Ezio's reaction had been far faster than the guard had anticipated, and before he could bring his arms up to defend himself Ezio tightened his grip on both throat and sword, and in one swift punching movement ran the guard through, slicing the sword in the body as he drew it out so that the man's intestines spilled from under his tunic on to the cobblestones. He threw the body aside and turned to the rostrum, fixing Alberti with his eye. 'I will kill you for this!' he screamed, his voice straining with hatred and rage.

But other guards were closing in. Ezio, his instinct for survival taking over, sped away from them, towards the comparative safety of the narrow streets beyond the square. To his dismay, he saw two more guards, swift of foot, rushing to cut him off.

They confronted each other at the edge of the square. The two guards faced him, blocking his retreat, the others closing in behind. Ezio fought them both frantically. Then an unlucky parry from one of them knocked his sword out of his hand. Fearing that this was the end, Ezio turned to flee from his attackers – but before he could find his feet, something astonishing happened. From the narrow street he was making for, and was within a few feet of, a roughly dressed man appeared. With lightning speed he came up on the two guards from behind, and, with a long dagger, cut deep under the pits of their sword arms, tearing through tendons and rendering them useless. He moved so fast that Ezio could scarcely follow his movements as he retrieved the young man's fallen sword and threw it to him. Ezio suddenly recognized him, and smelled once more the stench of onions and garlic. At that moment, damask roses couldn't have smelled sweeter.

‘Get out of here,’ said the man; and then he, too, was gone. Ezio plunged down the street, and ducked off it down alleys and lanes he knew intimately from his nightly forays with Federico. The hue and cry behind him faded. He made his way down to the river, and found refuge in a disused watchman’s shack behind one of the warehouses belonging to Cristina’s father.

In that hour Ezio ceased to be a boy and became a man. The weight of the responsibility he now felt he carried to avenge and correct this hideous wrong fell on his shoulders like a heavy cloak.

Slumping down on a pile of discarded sacks, he felt his whole body begin to shake. His world had just been torn apart. His father… Federico… and, God, no, little Petruccio… all gone, all dead, all murdered. Holding his head in his hands, he broke down – unable to control the pouring out of sorrow, fear and hatred. Only after several hours was he able to uncover his face – his eyes bloodshot and run through with an unbending vengeance. At that moment, Ezio knew his former life was over – Ezio the boy was gone for ever. From now, his life was forged for one purpose and one purpose alone – revenge.

Much later in the day, knowing full well that the watch would still be out looking for him relentlessly, he made his way via back alleys to Cristina’s family mansion. He didn’t want to put her in any danger, but he needed to collect his pouch with its precious contents. He waited in a dark alcove that stank of urine, not moving even when rats scuttled at his feet, until a light in her window told him that she had retired for the night.

‘Ezio!’ she cried as she saw him on her balcony. ‘Thank God you’re alive.’ Her face flooded with relief – but that was short-lived, grief taking over. ‘Your father, and brothers…’ She couldn’t finish the sentence, and her head bowed.

Ezio took her in his arms, and for several minutes they just stood holding each other.

Finally, she broke away. ‘You’re mad! What are you still doing in Florence?’

‘I still have matters to attend to,’ he said grimly. ‘But I cannot stay here long, it’s too big a risk for your family. If they thought you were harbouring me –’

Cristina was silent.

‘Give me my satchel and I’ll be gone.’

She fetched it for him, but before she gave it to him said, ‘What about your family?’

‘That is my first duty. To bury my dead. I can’t see them thrown into a lime-pit like common criminals.’

‘I know where they have taken them.’

‘How?’

‘The town’s been talking all day. But no one will be there now. They’re down near the Porta San Niccolò, with the bodies of paupers. There’s a pit prepared, and they’re waiting for the lime-carts to come in the morning. Oh, Ezio – !’

Ezio spoke calmly but grimly. ‘I must see to it that my father and my brothers have a fitting departure from this earth. I cannot offer them a Requiem Mass, but I can spare their bodies indignity.’

‘I’ll come with you!’

‘No! Do you realize what it would mean if you were caught with me?’

Cristina lowered her eyes.

‘I must see that my mother and sister are safe too, and I owe my family one more death.’ He hesitated. ‘Then I will leave. Perhaps for ever. The question is – will you come with me?’

She drew back, and he could see a host of conflicting emotions in her eyes. Love was there, deep and lasting, but he had grown so much older than she since they had first held each other in their arms. She was still a girl. How could he expect her to make such a sacrifice? ‘I want to, Ezio, you don’t know how much – but my family – it would kill my parents –’

Ezio looked at her gently. Though they were the same age, his recent experience had made him suddenly far more mature than she was. He had no family to depend on any more, just responsibility and duty, and it was hard. ‘I was wrong to ask. And who knows, perhaps, some day, when all this is behind us –’ He put his hands to his neck and from the folds of his collar withdrew a heavy silver pendant on a fine chain of gold. He took it off. The pendant bore a simple design – just the initial letter ‘A’ of his family name. ‘I want you to have this. Take it, please.’

With trembling hands she accepted it, crying softly. She looked down at it, then up at him, to thank him, to make some further excuse.

But he was gone.

On the south bank of the Arno, near the Porta San Niccolò, Ezio found the bleak place where the bodies were arranged next to a huge gaping pit. Two sorry-looking guards, raw recruits by the look of them, patrolled nearby, dragging their halberds as much as carrying them. The sight of their uniforms aroused Ezio’s anger, and his first instinct was to kill them, but he had seen enough of death that day, and these were just country boys who’d stumbled into uniforms for want of anything better. It caught at his heart when he saw his father’s and his brothers’ bodies lying near the edge of the pit, still with their nooses round their scorched necks, but he could see that, once the guards fell asleep, as they surely soon

would, he could carry the corpses to the river's edge, where he had prepared an open boat which he'd loaded with brushwood.

It was about the third hour, and the first faint light of dawn was already bleaching the eastern sky by the time he had completed his task. He stood alone on the riverbank, watching as the boat bearing his kinsmen's bodies, all aflame, drifted slowly with the current towards the sea. He watched until the light of the fire flickered away into the distance…

He made his way back to the city. A hard resolve had overcome his grief. There was still much to do. But first, he must rest. He returned to the watchman's shack, and made himself as comfortable as he could. Some little sleep would not be denied; but even as he slept, Cristina would not leave his thoughts, or dreams.

He knew the approximate whereabouts of the house of Annetta's sister, though he had never been there, or indeed met Paola; but Annetta had been his wet-nurse, and he knew that if he could trust no one else, he could trust her. He wondered if she knew, as she must, of the fate that had befallen his father and brothers, and if so, whether she had told his mother and sister.

He approached the house with great care, using an indirect route, and covering the distance where he could by running at a crouch over rooftops in order to avoid the busy streets where, he was sure, Uberto Alberti would have his men searching. Ezio could not rid himself of the thought of Alberti's treachery. What faction had his father referred to on the gallows? What could induce Alberti to bring about the death of one of his closest allies?

Paola's house lay in a street just north of the cathedral, Ezio knew. But when he got there, he didn't know which it was. There were few signs hanging from the fronts of the buildings here to identify them, and he could not afford to loiter in case he was recognized. He was about to depart when he saw Annetta herself, coming from the direction of the Piazza San Lorenzo.

Pulling his hood down so that his face was shadowed, he made his way to meet her, making himself walk at a normal pace, trying as best he could to blend in with his fellow citizens as they went about their business. He passed Annetta herself, and was gratified that she did not give any sign that she had noticed him. A few yards on, he doubled back and fell into step just behind her.

'Annetta –'

She had the wit not to turn round. 'Ezio. You're safe.'

'I wouldn't say that. Are my mother and sister…?'

'They are protected. Oh, Ezio, your poor father. And Federico. And –' she stifled a sob, '– little Petruccio. I have just come from San Lorenzo. I lit a candle

to San Antonio for them. They say the Duke will be here soon. Perhaps –'

'Do my mother and Maria know what has happened?'

'We thought it best to keep that knowledge from them.'

Ezio thought for a moment. 'It is best so. I will tell them when the time is right.' He paused. 'Will you take me to them? I couldn't identify your sister's house.'

'I am on my way there now. Stay close and follow me.'

He fell back a little, but kept her in sight.

The establishment she entered had the grim, fortress-like façade of so many of the grander Florentine buildings, but once inside, Ezio was taken aback. This was not quite what he had expected.

He found himself in a richly decorated parlour of great size, and high-ceilinged. It was dark, and the air was close. Velvet hangings in dark reds and deep browns covered the walls, interspersed with oriental tapestries depicting scenes of unequivocal luxury and sexual pleasure. The room was illuminated by candlelight, and a smell of incense hung in the air. The furniture mainly consisted of deep-seated daybeds covered with cushions of the costly brocade, and low tables on which there were trays bearing wine in silver carafes, Venetian glasses, and golden bowls of sweetmeats. But what was most surprising were the people in the room. A dozen beautiful girls, wearing silks and satins in green and yellow, cut in the Florentine fashion but with skirts slit to the top of the thigh, and plunging necklines that left nothing to the imagination except the promise of where it should not venture. Around three walls of the room, beneath the hangings and tapestries, a number of doors could be seen.

Ezio looked round, in a sense not knowing *where* to look. 'Are you sure this is the right place?' he asked Annetta.

'*Ma certo!* And here is my sister to greet us.'

An elegant woman who must have been in her late thirties but looked ten years younger, as beautiful as any *principessa* and better dressed than most, was coming towards them from the centre of the room. There was a veiled sadness in her eyes which somehow increased the sexual charge she transmitted, and Ezio, for all else that was on his mind, found himself stirred.

She extended her long-fingered, bejewelled hand to him. 'It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, *Messer* Auditore.' She looked at him appraisingly. 'Annetta speaks quite highly of you. And now I can see why.'

Ezio, blushing despite himself, replied, 'I appreciate the kind words, Madonna –'

'Please, call me Paola.'

Ezio bowed. ‘I cannot sufficiently express my gratitude to you for extending your protection to my mother and sister, Mado – I mean, Paola.’

‘It was the least I could do.’

‘Are they here? May I see them?’

‘They are not here – this would be no place for them, and some of my clients are highly placed in the city’s governance.’

‘Is this place then, forgive me, but is it what I think it is?’

Paola laughed. ‘Of course! But I hope it is rather different from those stews down by the docks! It is really too early for business, but we like to be ready – there’s always the chance of the occasional caller on his way to the office. Your timing is perfect.’

‘Where is my mother? Where is Claudia?’

‘They are safe, Ezio; but it’s too risky to take you to see them now, and we mustn’t compromise their security.’ She drew him to a sofa and sat down with him. Annetta, meanwhile, disappeared into the bowels of the house on some business of her own.

‘I think it will be best,’ Paola continued, ‘for you to leave Florence with them at the earliest opportunity. But you must rest first. You must gather your strength, for you have a long and arduous road ahead of you. Perhaps you’d like –’

‘You are kind, Paola,’ he interrupted her gently, ‘and you are right in what you suggest. But just now, I cannot stay.’

‘Why? Where are you going?’

During their conversation Ezio had been growing ever calmer, as all his racing thoughts came crashing together. At last he found himself able to shrug off his shock and his fear, for he had come to a decision and found a purpose, both of which he knew were irrevocable. ‘I am going to kill Uberto Alberti,’ he said.

Paola looked worried. ‘I understand your desire for vengeance, but the Gonfaloniere is a powerful man, and you’re not a natural killer, Ezio –’

Fate is making me one, he thought, but he said, as politely as he could, ‘Spare me the lecture,’ for he was bent on his mission.

Paola ignored him and completed her sentence: ‘– but I can make you one.’

Ezio fought down suspicion. ‘And why would you want to teach me how to kill?’

She shook her head, ‘In order to teach you how to survive.’

‘I’m not sure that I need any training from you.’

She smiled. ‘I know how you feel, but please allow me to hone the skills I am sure you have naturally. Think of my teaching as an extra weapon in your armoury.’

She started his training that very day, recruiting those girls who were off-duty, and trusted house-servants, to help her. In the high-walled garden behind the house she organized twenty of her people into five groups of four. They then started to mill around the garden, crisscrossing each other, talking and laughing, some of the girls casting bold looks on Ezio, and smiling. Ezio, who still carried his precious pouch at his side, was immune to their charms.

'Now,' Paola told him, 'discretion is paramount in my profession. We must be able to walk the streets freely – seen, but unseen. You too must learn properly how to blend in like us, and become one with the city's crowds.' Ezio was about to protest but she held up her hand. 'I know! Annetta tells me you do not acquit yourself badly, but you have more to learn than you know. I want you to pick a group and try to blend in with them. I don't want to be able to pick you out. Remember what almost happened to you at the execution.'

These harsh words stung Ezio, but the task didn't appear to him that difficult, provided he used his discretion. Still, under her unforgiving eye he found it harder than he'd expected. He would jostle clumsily against someone, or trip up, sometimes causing the girls or the male servants in his selected group to scatter from him, leaving him exposed. The garden was a pleasant place, sunlit and lush, and birds chirruped in the ornamental trees, but in Ezio's mind it became a labyrinth of unfriendly city streets, a potential enemy in every passerby. And always he was nettled by Paola's unremitting criticism. 'Careful!' she would say. 'You can't go charging in like that!' 'Show my girls some respect! Tread carefully when you're near them!' 'How do you plan to blend in with people if you're busy knocking them around?' 'Oh, Ezio! I expected better from you!'

But at last, on the third day, the biting comments grew fewer, and on the morning of the fourth he was able to pass right under Paola's nose without her batting an eyelid. Indeed, after fifteen minutes without saying a word, Paola called out: 'All right, Ezio, I give up! Where are you?'

Pleased with himself, he emerged from a group of girls, himself the very model of one of the young male house-servants. Paola smiled and clapped her hands, and the others joined in the applause.

But the work didn't end there.

'Now that you have learned to blend into a crowd,' Paola told him on the morning of the following day, 'I am going to show you how to use your new-found skill – in order to steal.'

Ezio baulked at this but Paola explained, 'It is an essential survival skill which you may need on your journey. A man is nothing without money, and you may not always be in a position to earn it honestly. I know you would never take anything from anyone who could not afford to lose it, or from a friend. Think of

it as a blade in a penknife, which you seldom use, though it's good to know it's there.'

Learning how to pick pockets was a lot harder. He would sidle up to a girl successfully enough, but as soon as his hand closed on the purse at her girdle, she would scream '*Al ladro!*' and flee from him. When he first managed to draw some coins out successfully, he stayed where he was for a moment, triumphant, then felt a heavy hand on his shoulder. '*Ti arresto!*' said the manservant who was playing the role of a city watchman, grinning; but Paola did not smile. 'Once you've stolen from someone, Ezio,' she said, 'you mustn't linger.'

He was learning faster now, though, and was beginning to appreciate the need to acquire the skills he was being taught as necessary for the successful accomplishment of his mission. Once he had successfully fleeced ten girls, the last five without even Paola noticing, she announced that the tutorial was at an end.

'Back to work, girls,' she said. 'Playtime's over.'

'Do we have to?' the girls murmured reluctantly as they took their leave of Ezio. 'He's so cute, so innocent…' But Paola was adamant.

She walked with him alone in the garden. As always, he kept one hand on his pouch. 'Now that you've learned how to approach the enemy,' she said, 'we need to find you a suitable weapon – something far more subtle than a sword.'

'Well, but what would you have me use?'

'Why, you already have the answer!' And she produced the broken blade and bracer which Ezio had taken from his father's strongbox, and which even now he believed to be safely stowed in his pouch. Shocked, he opened it and rummaged. They were indeed gone.

'Paola! How the devil – ?'

Paola laughed. 'Did I get them? By using the same skills I've just taught you. But there's another little lesson for you. Now you know how to pick a pocket successfully, you must also learn to be on guard against people with the same skill!'

Ezio looked gloomily at the broken blade, which she'd returned to him with the bracer. 'There's some kind of mechanism that goes with them. None of this is exactly in working condition,' he said.

'Ah,' she said. 'True. But I think you already know *Messer* Leonardo?'

'Da Vinci? Yes, I met him just before –' He broke off, forcing himself not to dwell on the painful memory. 'But how can a painter be of any help to me with this?'

'He's a lot more than just a painter. Take him the pieces. You'll see.'

Ezio, seeing the sense of what she was telling him, nodded his agreement, then said, ‘Before I go, may I ask you one last question?’

‘Of course.’

‘Why have you given your aid so readily to me – a stranger?’

Paola gave him a sad smile. By way of an answer, she drew up one of the sleeves of her robe, revealing a pale, delicate forearm – whose beauty was marred by the ugly, long dark scars which criss-crossed it. Ezio looked and knew. At some time in her life this lady had been tortured.

‘I, too, have known betrayal,’ Paola said.

And Ezio recognized without hesitation that he had met a kindred spirit.

5

It was not far from Paola’s luxurious House of Pleasure to the busy back streets where Leonardo’s workshop was, but Ezio did have to cross the spacious and busy Piazza del Duomo, and here he found his newly acquired skills of merging into the crowd especially useful. It was a good ten days since the executions, and it was likely that Alberti would imagine that Ezio would have left Florence long since, but Ezio was taking no chances, and nor, by the look of the number of guards posted in and around the square, was Alberti. There would be plain-clothes agents in place as well. Ezio kept his head well down, especially when passing between the cathedral and the Baptistry, where the square was busiest. He passed by Giotto’s campanile, which had dominated the city for almost one hundred and fifty years, and the great red mass of Brunelleschi’s cathedral dome, completed only fifteen years earlier, without seeing them, though he was aware of groups of French and Spanish tourists gazing up in unfeigned amazement and admiration, and a little burst of pride in his city tugged at his heart. But was it his city, really, any more?

Suppressing any gloomy thoughts, he quickly made his way from the south side of the piazza to Leonardo’s workshop. The Master was at home, he was told, in the yard at the back. The studio was, if anything, in a greater state of chaos than ever, though there did seem to be some rough method in the madness. The artefacts Ezio had noticed on his earlier visit had been added to, and from the ceiling hung a strange contraption in wood, though it looked like a scaled-up skeleton of a bat. On one of the easels a large parchment pinned to a board carried a massive and impossibly intricate knot-design, and in a corner of it some indecipherable scribbling in Leonardo’s hand. Agniolo had been joined by

another assistant, Innocento, and the two were trying to impose some order on the studio, cataloguing the stuff in order to keep track of it.

'He's in the back yard,' Agniolo told Ezio. 'Just go through. He won't mind.'

Ezio found Leonardo engaged in a curious activity. Everywhere in Florence you could buy caged songbirds. People hung them in their windows for pleasure, and when they died, simply replaced them. Leonardo was surrounded by a dozen such cages and, as Ezio watched, he selected one, opened the little wicker door, held the cage up, and watched as the linnet (in this case) found the entrance, pushed its way through, and flew free. Leonardo watched its departure keenly, and was turning to pick up another cage when he noticed Ezio standing there.

He smiled winningly and warmly at the sight of him, and embraced him. Then his face grew grave. 'Ezio! My friend. I hardly expected to see you here, after what you've been through. But welcome, welcome. Just bear with me one minute. This won't take long.'

Ezio watched as he released one after another of the various thrushes, bullfinches, larks and far more expensive nightingales into the air, watching each one very carefully.

'What are you doing?' asked Ezio, wonderingly.

'All life is precious,' Leonardo replied simply. 'I cannot bear to see my fellow creatures imprisoned like this, just because they have fine voices.'

'Is that the only reason you release them?' Ezio suspected an ulterior motive.

Leonardo grinned, but gave no direct answer. 'I won't eat meat any more either. Why should some poor animal die just because it tastes good to us?'

'There'd be no work for farmers else.'

'They could all grow corn.'

'Imagine how boring that'd be. Anyway, there'd be a glut.'

'Ah, I was forgetting that you're a *finanziatore*. And I am forgetting my manners. What brings you here?'

'I need a favour, Leonardo.'

'How can I be of service?'

'There's something I… inherited from my father that I'd like you to repair, if you can.'

Leonardo's eyes lit up. 'Of course. Come this way. We'll use my inner chamber – those boys are cluttering everything up in the studio as usual. I sometimes wonder why I bother to employ them at all!'

Ezio smiled. He was beginning to see why, but at the same time sensed that Leonardo's first love was, and would always be, his work.

'Come this way.'

Leonardo's smaller, inner room was even more untidy than the studio, but among the masses of books and specimens, and papers covered with that indecipherable scrawl, the artist, as always (and incongruously) impeccably dressed and scented, carefully piled some stuff on other stuff until a space was cleared on a large drafting table.

'Forgive the confusion,' he said. 'But at last we have an oasis! Let's see what you've got for me. Unless you'd like a glass of wine first?'

'No, no.'

'Good,' said Leonardo eagerly. 'Let's see it, then!'

Ezio carefully extracted the blade, bracer and mechanism, which he had previously wrapped in the mysterious vellum page that had accompanied them. Leonardo tried in vain to put the pieces of machinery back together but failed, and seemed for a moment to despair.

'I don't know, Ezio,' he said. 'This mechanism is old – very old – but it's very sophisticated as well, and its construction is ahead I would say even of our time. Fascinating.' He looked up. 'I've certainly never seen anything like it. But I'm afraid there's little I can do without the original plans.'

Then he turned his attention to the vellum page, which he had picked up in order to wrap Ezio's pieces back up again. 'Wait a second!' he cried, poring over it. Then he placed the broken blade and bracer to one side, spread out the sheet, and, referring to it, began to rummage among a row of old books and manuscripts on a nearby shelf. Finding the two he wanted, he placed them on the table and began carefully to leaf through them.

'What are you doing?' asked Ezio, slightly impatiently.

'This is very interesting,' said Leonardo. 'This looks very like a page from a Codex.'

'A what?'

'It's a page from an ancient book. This isn't printed, it's in manuscript. It's very old indeed. Have you any more of them?'

'No.'

'Pity. People shouldn't tear the pages out of books like this.' Leonardo paused. 'Unless, perhaps, the whole thing together –'

'What?'

'Nothing. Look, the contents of this page are encrypted; but if my theory is correct… based on these sketches it may very well be that…'

Ezio waited, but Leonardo was lost in a world of his own. He took a seat and waited patiently while Leonardo rummaged through and pored over a number of books and scrolls, making cross-references and notes, all in that curious left-handed mirror-writing he used. Ezio wasn't the only one, he supposed, to live his

life with one eye looking behind him. From the little he'd seen of what was going on in the studio, if the Church got wind of some of the things Leonardo was up to, he didn't doubt that his friend would be for the high jump.

At last Leonardo looked up. But by that time Ezio was beginning to doze. 'Remarkable,' muttered Leonardo to himself, and then in a louder voice, 'Remarkable! If we transpose the letters and then select every third…'

He set to work, drawing the blade, bracer and mechanism towards him. He dug out a toolbox from under the table, set up a vice, and quietly became absorbed in his work. An hour passed, two… Ezio by now was sleeping peacefully, lulled by the warm fug of the room and the gentle sounds of tapping and scraping as Leonardo worked on. And at last –

'Ezio! Wake up!'

'Eh?'

'Look!' And Leonardo pointed to the tabletop. The dagger blade, fully restored, had been fitted into the strange mechanism, which in turn was fixed to the bracer. Everything was polished and looked as if it had just been made, but nothing shone. 'A matt finish, I decided,' said Leonardo. 'Like Roman armour. Anything which shines glints in the sun, and that's a dead giveaway.'

Ezio picked up the weapon and hefted it in his hands. It was light, but the strong blade was perfectly balanced on it. Ezio had never seen anything like it. A spring-loaded dagger that he could conceal above his wrist. All he had to do was flex his hand and the blade would spring out, ready to slash or stab as its user desired.

'I thought you were a man of peace,' said Ezio, remembering the birds.

'Ideas take precedence,' said Leonardo with decision. 'Whatever they are. Now,' he added, producing a hammer and chisel from his toolbox. 'You're right-handed, aren't you? Good. Then kindly place your right ring finger on this block.'

'What are you doing?'

'I'm sorry, but this is how it must be done. The blade is designed to ensure the total commitment of whoever wields it.'

'What do you mean?'

'It'll only work if we have that finger off.'

Ezio blinked. His mind flashed on a number of images: he remembered Alberti's supposed friendliness to his father, how Alberti had later reassured him after his father's arrest, the executions, his own pursuit. He clamped his jaw. 'Do it.'

'Maybe I should use a cleaver. Cleaner cut that way.' Leonardo produced one from a drawer in the table. 'Now – just place your finger – *così*.'

Ezio steeled himself as Leonardo raised the cleaver. He closed his eyes as he heard it brought down – *schunk!* – into the wood of the block. But he'd felt no pain. He opened his eyes. The cleaver was stuck in the block, inches from his hand, which was intact.

'You bastard!' Ezio was shocked, and furious at this tasteless practical joke.

Leonardo raised his hands. 'Calm yourself! It was just a bit of fun! Cruel, I admit, but I simply couldn't resist. I wanted to see how determined you were. You see, the use of this machine originally *did* require such a sacrifice. Something to do with an ancient initiation ceremony, I think. But I've made one or two adjustments. So you can keep your finger. Look! The blade comes out well clear of them, and I've added a hilt that flips out when the blade's extended. All you have to do is remember to keep them splayed *as* it's coming out! So you can keep your finger. But you might like to wear gloves when you use it – the blade is keen.'

Ezio was too fascinated – and grateful – to be angry for long. 'This is extraordinary,' he said, opening and closing the dagger several times until he could time its use perfectly. 'Incredible.'

'Isn't it?' agreed Leonardo. 'Are you sure you don't have any more pages like this one?'

'I'm sorry.'

'Well, listen, if you do happen across any more, please bring them to me.'

'You have my word. And how much do I owe you for – ?'

'A pleasure. Most instructive. There is no –'

They were interrupted by a hammering at the outer door of the studio. Leonardo hurried through to the front of the building as Agniolo and Innocento looked up fearfully. The person on the other side of the door had started to bellow, 'Open up, by order of the Florentine Guard!'

'Just a moment!' Leonardo shouted back, but in a lower voice he said to Ezio, 'Stay back there.'

Then he opened the door, and stood in it, blocking the guardsman's way.

'You Leonardo da Vinci?' asked the guard in one of those loud, bullying, official voices.

'What can I do for you?' said Leonardo, moving out into the street, obliging the guard to step back.

'I am empowered to ask you certain questions.' Leonardo had by now so manoeuvred himself that the guard had his back to the doorway of the studio.

'What seems to be the trouble?'

'We've had a report that you were seen just now consorting with a known enemy of the city.'

‘What, me? Consorting? Preposterous!’

‘When was the last time you either saw or spoke to Ezio Auditore?’

‘Who?’

‘Don’t play silly buggers with me. We know you were close to the family. Sold the mother a couple of your daubs. Maybe I need to refresh your memory a bit?’ And the guard hit Leonardo in the stomach with the butt of his halberd. With a sharp cry of pain, Leonardo doubled up and fell to the ground, where the guard kicked him. ‘Ready to chat now, are we? I don’t like artists. Load of poofs.’

But this had given Ezio enough time to step quietly through the doorway and position himself behind the guard. The street was deserted. The nape of the man’s sweaty neck was exposed. It was as good a time as any to give his new toy a trial run. He raised his hand, triggered the release mechanism, and the silent blade shot out. With a deft movement of his now open right hand, Ezio stabbed once into the side of the guard’s neck. The recently honed edge of the blade was viciously sharp, and eased through the man’s jugular without the slightest resistance. The guard fell, dead before he hit the ground.

Ezio helped Leonardo up.

‘Thank you,’ said the shaken artist.

‘I’m sorry – I didn’t mean to kill him – there was no time –’

‘Sometimes we don’t have an alternative. But I should be used to this by now.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I was involved in the Saltarelli case.’

Ezio remembered then. A young artist’s model, Jacopo Saltarelli, had been anonymously denounced a few weeks earlier for practising prostitution, and Leonardo, along with three others, had been accused of patronizing him. The case had fallen apart for lack of evidence, but some of the mud had stuck. ‘But we don’t prosecute homosexual men here,’ he said. ‘Why, I seem to remember that the Germans have a nickname for them – they call them *Florenzer.*’

‘It’s still officially against the law,’ said Leonardo drily. ‘You can still get fined. And with men like Alberti in charge –’

‘What about the body?’

‘Oh,’ said Leonardo. ‘It’s quite a windfall. Help me drag it inside before anyone sees us. I’ll put it with the others.’

‘Windfall? Others?’

‘The cellar’s quite cold. They keep for a week. I get one or two cadavers that no one else wants from the hospital now and then. All unofficial, of course. But I cut them open, and dig about a bit – it helps me with my research.’

Ezio looked at his friend more than curiously. ‘What?’

‘I think I told you – I like to find out how things work.’

They dragged the body out of sight, and Leonardo’s two assistants manhandled it through a door down some stone steps, out of sight.

‘But what if they send someone after him – to find out what happened to him?’

Leonardo shrugged. ‘I’ll deny all knowledge.’ He winked. ‘I’m not without powerful friends here, Ezio.’

Ezio was nonplussed. He said, ‘Well, you seem confident enough…’

‘Just don’t mention this incident to anyone else.’

‘I won’t – and thank you, Leonardo, for everything.’

‘A pleasure. And don’t forget –’ a hungry look had crept into his eyes, ‘– if you find any more pages from this Codex, bring them to me. Who knows what other new designs they might contain.’

‘I promise!’

Ezio made his way back to Paola’s house in triumphant mood, though he did not forget to lose himself in the anonymity of the crowd as he passed back north through the town.

Paola greeted him with some relief. ‘You were gone longer than I’d expected.’

‘Leonardo likes to talk.’

‘But that’s not all he did, I hope?’

‘Oh no. Look!’ And he showed her the wrist-dagger, extending it from his sleeve with an extravagant flourish, and a boyish grin.

‘Impressive.’

‘Yes.’ Ezio looked at it admiringly. ‘I’ll need a bit of practice with it. I want to keep all my own fingers.’

Paola looked serious. ‘Well, Ezio, it looks as if you’re all set. I’ve given you the skills you need, Leonardo has repaired your weapon.’ She took a breath. ‘All that’s needed now is for you to do the deed.’

‘Yes,’ said Ezio quietly, his expression darkening again. ‘The question is, how best to gain access to *Messer* Alberti.’

Paola looked thoughtful. ‘Duke Lorenzo is back with us. He isn’t happy about the executions Alberti authorized in his absence, but he doesn’t have the power to challenge the Gonfaloniere. Nevertheless, there’s to be a vernissage for Maestro Verrocchio’s latest work at the cloister of Santa Croce tomorrow night. All Florentine society will be there, including Alberti.’ She looked at him. ‘I think you should be, too.’

Ezio found out that the piece of sculpture to be unveiled was a bronze statue of David, the biblical hero with whom Florence associated itself, poised as the city was between the twin Goliaths of Rome to the south and the land-hungry kings of France to the north. It had been commissioned by the Medici family and was destined to be installed in the Palazzo Vecchio. The Maestro had started work on it three or four years earlier, and a rumour had been going round that the head was modelled on one of Verrocchio's handsomer young apprentices of the time – a certain Leonardo da Vinci. At any rate, there was great excitement, and people were already dithering about what to wear for the occasion.

Ezio had other matters to ponder.

'Watch over my mother and sister while I'm gone,' he asked Paola.

'As if they were my own.'

'And if anything should happen to me –'

'Have faith, and it won't.'

Ezio made his way to Santa Croce in good time the following evening. He had spent the previous hours preparing himself, and honing his skills with his new weapon, until he was satisfied that he was fully proficient in its use. His thoughts dwelt on the deaths of his father and brothers, and the cruel tones of Alberti's voice as he passed sentence rang all too clearly in his mind.

As he approached, he saw two figures whom he recognized walking ahead of him, slightly apart from a small squad of bodyguards whose uniform displayed a badge of five red balls on a yellow ground. They appeared to be arguing, and he hurried forward to bring himself within earshot of them. They paused in front of the portico of the church, and he hovered nearby, out of sight, to listen. The men addressed each other in tight-lipped tones. One was Uberto Alberti; the other, a slim young man in his mid to late twenties, with a prominent nose and a determined face, was richly dressed in a red cap and cloak, over which he wore a silver-grey tunic. Duke Lorenzo – *Il Magnifico*, as his subjects called him, to the disgust of the Pazzi and their faction.

'You cannot tax me with this,' Alberti was saying. 'I acted on information received and irrefutable evidence – I acted within the law and within the bounds of my office!'

'No! You overstepped your bounds, Gonfaloniere, and you took advantage of my absence from Florence to do so. I am more than displeased.'

'Who are you to speak of bounds? You have seized power over this city, made yourself duke of it, without the formal consent of the Signoria or anyone else!'

'I have done no such thing!'

Alberti permitted himself a sardonic laugh. 'Of course you'd say that! Ever the innocent! How convenient for you. You surround yourself at Careggi with

men most of the rest of us consider dangerous free-thinkers – Ficino, Mirandola, and that creep Poliziano! But at least now we have had a chance to see how far your reach really extends – which is to say, nowhere at all, in any practical terms. That has proved a valuable lesson for my allies and me.'

'Yes. Your allies the Pazzi. That's what this is really all about, isn't it?'

Alberti studied his fingernails elaborately before replying. 'I'd be careful what you say, Duce. You might attract the wrong sort of attention.' But he didn't sound completely sure of himself.

'You are the one who should watch his mouth, Gonfaloniere. And I suggest you pass that advice on to your associates – take it as a friendly warning.' With that, Lorenzo swept away with his bodyguard in the direction of the cloister. After a moment, muttering some oath under his breath, Alberti followed. It almost sounded to Ezio as if the man were cursing himself.

The cloisters themselves had been draped with cloth-of-gold for the occasion, which dazzlingly reflected the light from hundreds of candles. On a rostrum near the fountain in the centre, a group of musicians played, and on another stood the bronze statue, a half life-size figure of exquisite beauty. As Ezio entered, using columns and shadows to conceal himself, he could see Lorenzo complimenting the artist. Ezio also recognized the mysterious cowled figure who'd been on the execution platform with Alberti.

Some distance away, Alberti himself stood surrounded by admiring members of the local nobility. From what he could hear, Ezio understood that they were congratulating the Gonfaloniere on ridding the city of the canker of the Auditore family. He had not thought that his father had so many enemies, as well as friends, in the city, but realized that they had only dared move against him when his principal ally, Lorenzo, had been absent. Ezio smiled as one noblewoman told Alberti that she hoped the Duke appreciated his integrity. It was clear that Alberti didn't like that suggestion one bit. Then he overheard more.

'What of the other son?' a nobleman was asking. 'Ezio, wasn't it? Has he escaped for good?'

Alberti managed a smile. 'The boy poses no danger whatsoever. Soft hands and an even softer head. He'll be caught and executed before the week is out.'

The company around him laughed.

'So – what's next for you, Uberto?' asked another man. 'The Chair of the Signoria, perhaps?'

Alberti spread his hands. 'It is as God wills. My only interest is to continue to serve Florence, faithfully and diligently.'

'Well, whatever you choose, know that you have our support.'

‘That is most gratifying. We’ll see what the future brings.’ Alberti beamed, but modestly. ‘And now, my friends, I suggest that we put politics aside and give ourselves over to the enjoyment of this sublime work of art, so generously donated by the noble Medici.’

Ezio waited until Alberti’s companions wandered away in the direction of the *David*. For his part, Alberti took a goblet of wine and surveyed the scene, a mixture of satisfaction and wariness in his eyes. Ezio knew that this was his opportunity. All other eyes were on the statue, near which Verrocchio was stumbling through a short speech. Ezio slipped up to Alberti’s side.

‘It must have stuck in your craw to pay that last compliment,’ Ezio hissed. ‘But it’s appropriate that you should be insincere to the end.’

Recognizing him, Alberti’s eyes bulged in terror. ‘You!’

‘Yes, Gonfaloniere. It’s Ezio. Here to avenge the murder of my father – your friend – and my innocent brothers.’

Alberti heard the dull click of a spring, a metallic sound, and saw the blade poised at his throat.

‘Goodbye, Gonfaloniere,’ said Ezio, coldly.

‘Stop,’ gasped Alberti. ‘In my position, you would have done the same – to protect the ones you loved. Forgive me, Ezio – I had no choice.’

Ezio leant close, ignoring his plea. He knew the man had had a choice – an honourable one – and had been too supine to make it. ‘Do you not think I am not protecting the ones *I* love? What mercy would you show my mother or my sister, if you could lay your hands on them? Now: where are the documents I gave you from my father? You must have them somewhere safe.’

‘You’ll never get them. I always carry them on my person!’ Alberti tried to push Ezio away, and drew in a breath to call for the guards, but Ezio plunged the dagger into his throat and dragged its blade through the man’s jugular artery. Unable now even to gurgle, Alberti sank to his knees, his hands instinctively clutching at his neck in a vain attempt to staunch the blood that cascaded down on to the grass. As he fell on his side, Ezio stooped swiftly and cut the man’s wallet free of his belt. He glanced inside. Alberti in his final hubris had been telling the truth. The documents were indeed there.

But now there was silence. Verrocchio’s speech had ground to a halt as the guests began to turn and stare, not yet comprehending what had happened. Ezio stood and faced them.

‘Yes! What you see is real! What you see is vengeance! The Auditore family still lives. I am still here! Ezio Auditore!’

He caught his breath at the same moment as a woman’s voice rang out, ‘*Assassino!*’

Now chaos reigned. Lorenzo's bodyguard quickly formed up round him, swords drawn. The guests ran hither and yon, some trying to escape, the braver ones going through the motions at least of trying to seize Ezio, though none quite dared make a real attempt. Ezio noticed the cowled figure slipping away into the shadows. Verrocchio stood protectively by his statue. Women screamed, men shouted, and city guards streamed into the cloisters, unsure of whom to pursue. Ezio took advantage of this, climbing up to the roof of the cloister colonnade and vaulting over it into a courtyard beyond, whose open gate led into the square in front of the church, where a curious crowd was already gathering, attracted by the sound of the commotion within.

'What's happening?' someone asked Ezio.

'Justice has been done,' Ezio replied, before racing north-west across town to the safety of Paola's mansion.

He paused on the way to verify the contents of Alberti's wallet. At least the man's last words had been truthful. Everything was there. And there was something else. An undelivered letter in Alberti's hand. Perhaps fresh knowledge for Ezio, who broke the seal and tore the parchment open.

But it was a personal note from Alberti to his wife. As he read it, Ezio could at least understand what kind of forces might be brought to bear to break a man's integrity.

My love
I put these thoughts to paper in the hope that I might one day have the courage to share them with you. In time, you'll no doubt learn that I betrayed Giovanni Auditore, labelled him a traitor and sentenced him to die. History will likely judge this act to have been a matter of politics and greed. But you must understand that it was not fate that forced my hand, but fear.

When the Medici robbed our family of all we owned, I found myself afraid. For you. For our son. For the future. What hope is there in this world for a man without proper means? As for the others, they offered me money, land and title in exchange for my collaboration.

And this is how I came to betray my closest friend.
However unspeakable the act, it seemed necessary at the time.

And even now, looking back, I can see no other way…

Ezio folded the letter carefully and replaced it in his wallet. He would reseal it, and see that it was delivered. He was determined not to stoop to mean-spiritedness, ever.

6

‘It’s done,’ he told Paola, simply.

She embraced him briefly, then stood back. ‘I know. I am glad to see you safe.’

‘I think it’s time for me to leave Florence.’

‘Where will you go?’

‘My father’s brother Mario has an estate near Monteriggioni. We’ll go there.’

‘There’s a huge hunt on for you already, Ezio. They are putting up “wanted” posters everywhere with your picture on them. And the public orators are beginning to speak against you.’ She paused, thoughtfully. ‘I’ll get some of my people to go out and tear down as many posters as they can, and the orators can be bribed to speak of other things.’ Another thought struck her. ‘And I’d better have travel papers drawn up for the three of you.’

Ezio shook his head, thinking of Alberti. ‘What is this world we live in, where belief can so easily be manipulated?’

‘Alberti was placed in what he saw as an impossible position, but he should have held firm against it.’ She sighed. ‘Truth is traded every day. It’s something you’ll have to get used to, Ezio.’

He took her hands in his. ‘Thank you.’

‘Florence will be a better place now, especially if Duke Lorenzo can get one of his own men elected Gonfaloniere. But now there is no time to waste. Your mother and sister are here.’ She turned and clapped her hands. ‘Annetta!’

Annetta emerged from the back of the house, bringing Maria and Claudia with her. It was an emotional reunion. Ezio saw that his mother was not much recovered, and still clasped Petruccio’s little box of feathers in her hand. She returned his embrace, though absently, while Paola looked on with a sad smile.

Claudia, on the other hand, clung to him. ‘Ezio! Where have you been? Paola and Annetta have been so kind, but they won’t let us go home. And Mother hasn’t spoken a word since –’ She broke off, fighting her own tears. ‘Well,’ she said, recovering, ‘perhaps now Father will be able to sort things out for us. It must all have been a dreadful misunderstanding, no?’

Paola looked at him. ‘This might be the time,’ she said softly. ‘They will have to know the truth soon.’

Claudia’s gaze shifted from Ezio to Paola and back again. Maria had seated herself next to Annetta, who had her arm round her. Maria stared into space, smiling faintly, caressing the pearwood box.

‘What is it, Ezio?’ asked Claudia, fear in her voice.

‘Something’s happened.’

‘What do you mean?’

Ezio was silent, at a loss for words, but his expression told her everything.

‘Oh, God, no!’

‘Claudia –’

‘Tell me it’s not true!

Ezio hung his head.

‘No, no, no, no, no!’ cried Claudia.

‘Shhh.’ He tried to calm her. ‘I did everything I could, *piccina*.’

Claudia buried her head in his chest and cried, long, harsh sobs, while Ezio did his best to comfort her. He looked over her head at his mother, but she didn’t appear to have heard. Perhaps, in her own way, she already knew. After all the turmoil that had descended upon Ezio’s life, having to witness his sister and his mother thrown into the depths of despair was almost enough to break him. He stood, holding his sister in his arms, for what seemed an eternity – feeling the responsibility of the world on his shoulders. It was up to him to protect his family now – the Auditore name was his to honour. Ezio the boy was no more… He collected his thoughts.

‘Listen,’ he said to Claudia, once she had quietened a little. ‘What matters now is that we get away from here. Somewhere safe, where you and Mamma can remain in security. But if we are to do that I need you to be brave. You must be strong for me, and look after our mother. Do you understand?’

She listened, cleared her throat, pulled away from him a little, and looked up at him. ‘Yes.’

‘Then we must make our preparations now. Go and pack what you need, but bring little with you – we must leave on foot – a carriage would be too dangerous to organize. Wear your simplest clothes – we must not draw attention to ourselves. And hurry!’

Claudia left with their mother and Annetta.

‘You should bathe and change,’ said Paola to him. ‘You’ll feel better.’

Two hours later their travel papers were ready and they could leave. Ezio checked the contents of his satchel carefully one last time. Perhaps his uncle could explain the contents of the documents he had taken from Alberti, which had clearly been of such vital importance to him. His new dagger was strapped to his right forearm, out of sight. He tightened his belt. Claudia led Maria into the garden and stood by the door in the wall by which they were to leave, with Annetta, who was trying not to cry.

Ezio turned to Paola. ‘Goodbye. And thank you again, for everything.’

She put her arms round him and kissed him close to his mouth. ‘Stay safe, Ezio, and stay vigilant. I suspect the road ahead of you is yet long.’

He bowed gravely, then drew up his hood and joined his mother and sister, picking up the bag they had packed. They kissed Annetta goodbye, and moments later they were in the street, walking north, Claudia with her arm linked through her mother’s. For a while they were silent, and Ezio pondered the great responsibility he had now been obliged to shoulder. He prayed that he would be able to rise to the occasion, but it was hard. He would have to remain strong, but he would manage it for the sake of Claudia and his poor mother, who seemed to have retreated completely into herself.

They had reached the centre of the city when Claudia started to speak – and she was full of questions. He noticed with gratification, though, that her voice was firm.

‘How could this have happened to us?’ she said.

‘I don’t know.’

‘Do you think we’ll ever be able to come back?’

‘I don’t know, Claudia.’

‘What will happen to our house?’

He shook his head. There had been no time to make any arrangements, and if there had been, with whom could he have made them? Perhaps Duke Lorenzo would be able to close it up, have it guarded, but that was a faint hope.

‘Were they… Were they given a proper funeral?’

‘Yes. I… arranged it myself.’ They were crossing the Arno and Ezio allowed himself a glance downriver.

At last they were approaching the southern city gates, and Ezio was grateful that they had got this far undetected, but it was a dangerous moment, for the gates were heavily policed. Thankfully the documents in false names which Paola had provided them with passed muster, and the guards were on the lookout for a desperate young man on his own, not a modestly dressed little family.

They travelled south steadily all that day, pausing only when they were well clear of the city to buy bread, cheese and wine at a farmhouse and to rest for an hour under the shade of an oak tree at the edge of a cornfield. Ezio had to rein in his impatience, for it was almost thirty miles to Monteriggioni and they had to travel at his mother's pace. She was a strong woman at the beginning of her forties, but the massive shock she had sustained had aged her. He prayed that once they reached Uncle Mario's she would recover, though he could see that any recovery would be a slow one. He hoped that, barring any setback, they would reach Mario's estate by the afternoon of the following day.

That night they spent in a deserted barn, where at least there was clean, warm hay. They dined on the remains of their lunch, and made Maria as comfortable as possible. She made no complaint, indeed she seemed completely unaware of her surroundings; but when Claudia tried to take Petruccio's box from her when getting her ready for bed, she protested violently and pushed her daughter away, swearing at her like a fishwife. Brother and sister were shocked at that.

But she slept peacefully, and seemed refreshed the next morning. They washed themselves in a brook, drank some of its clear water in lieu of breakfast, and continued on their way. It was a bright day, pleasantly warm but with a cooling breeze, and they made good progress, passing only a handful of wagons on the road and seeing no one except the odd group of labourers in the fields and orchards they walked by. Ezio was able to buy some fruit, enough at least for Claudia and his mother, but he wasn't hungry anyway – he was too nervous to eat.

At last, in mid-afternoon, he was heartened to see the little walled town of Monteriggioni bathed in sunshine on its hill in the distance. Mario effectively ruled the district. Another mile or two, and they would be within his territory. Heartened, the little group quickened their pace.

'Nearly there,' he told Claudia, with a smile.

'*Grazie a Dio*,' she replied, returning it.

They'd just started to relax when, at a turn in the road, a familiar figure, accompanied by a dozen men in blue-and-gold liveries, blocked their way. One of the guards carried a standard bearing the hated, familiar emblem of golden dolphins and crosses on a blue ground.

'Ezio!' the figure greeted him. '*Buon' giorno*! And your family – or at least, what's left of it! What a pleasant surprise!' He nodded to his men, who fanned out across the road, halberds at the ready.

'Vieri!'

'The same. As soon as they released my father from custody, he was more than happy to finance this little hunting party for me. I was hurt. After all, how

could you think of leaving Florence without saying a proper goodbye?'

Ezio advanced a pace, ushering Claudia and his mother behind him.

'What do you want, Vieri? I should have thought you'd be satisfied with what the Pazzi have managed to achieve.'

Vieri spread his hands. 'What do I want? Well, it's hard to know where to begin. So many things! Let's see… I'd like a larger palazzo, a prettier wife, much more money and – what else? – Oh, yes! Your head!' He drew his sword, motioning his guards to stay ready, and advanced on Ezio himself.

'I'm surprised, Vieri – are you really going to take me on all alone? But of course your bully boys are right behind you!'

'I don't think you're worthy of my sword,' retorted Vieri, sheathing it again. 'I think I'll just finish you off with my fists. Sorry if this distresses you, *tesora*,' he added to Claudia, 'but don't worry – it won't take long, then I'll see what I can do to comfort you – and who knows, maybe your little mamma as well!'

Ezio stepped forward fast and connected his fist to Vieri's jaw so that his enemy staggered, taken off guard. But, regaining his feet, Vieri waved his men back and hurled himself on to Ezio with a furious roar, piling on blow after blow. Such was the ferocity of Vieri's attack that while Ezio parried with skill, he was unable to land a meaningful blow of his own. Both men were locked together, wrestling for control, occasionally staggering back only to fling themselves at each other with renewed vigour. Eventually Ezio was able to use Vieri's anger to work against him – no one ever fought effectively in a rage. Vieri wound up to throw a huge haymaker with his right; Ezio stepped forward and the blow glanced uselessly off his shoulder, Vieri's momentum carrying his weight forward uncontrolled. Ezio tripped up his opponent's heels and sent him rolling in the dust. Bleeding and bested, Vieri scrambled to safety behind his men, and stood up, dusting himself down with his grazed hands.

'I tire of this,' he said, and shouted to the guards. 'Finish him off, and the women too. I can do better than that scrawny little tadpole and her *carcassa* of a mother!'

'*Coniglio*!' yelled Ezio, panting for breath, drawing his sword, but the guards had formed a circle round them and extended their halberds. He knew he'd have a hard time closing with them.

The circle tightened. Ezio kept swinging round, trying to keep his womenfolk behind him, but things looked black, and Vieri's unpleasant laugh was one of triumph.

Suddenly there was a sharp, almost ethereal whistling noise and two of the guards to Ezio's left crumpled to their knees and fell forward, dropping their weapons as they did so. From each of their backs projected a throwing-knife,

buried to the hilt and clearly aimed with deadly accuracy. Blood billowed out from their shirts, like crimson flowers.

The others drew back in alarm, but not before one more of their number had fallen to the ground, a knife in his back.

'What sorcery is this?' yelped Vieri, terror cutting his voice, drawing his sword and looking round wildly.

He was answered by a deep-throated, booming laugh. 'Nothing to do with sorcery, boy – everything to do with skill!' The voice was coming from a nearby coppice.

'Show yourself!'

A large bearded man wearing high boots and a light breastplate emerged from the little wood. Behind him several others, similarly attired, appeared. 'As you wish,' he said, sardonically.

'Mercenaries!' snarled Vieri, then turned to his own guards. 'What are you waiting for? Kill them! Kill them all!'

But the large man stepped forward, wrested Vieri's sword from him with unbelievable grace, and snapped the blade over his knee as easily as if it had been a twig. 'I don't think that's a very good idea, little Pazzi, though I must say you live up to your family name.'

Vieri didn't answer, but urged his men on. Not very willingly, they closed with the strangers, while Vieri, picking up the halberd of one of his dead guards, rounded on Ezio, knocking his sword out of his hand and out of reach just as he was drawing it.

'Here, Ezio, use this!' said the large man, throwing him another sword, which flew through the air to land on its point, quivering in the ground at his feet. In a flash he'd picked it up. It was a heavy weapon and he had to use both hands to wield it, but he was able to sever the shaft of Vieri's halberd. Vieri himself, seeing that his men were being easily bested by the *condottieri*, and that two more were already down, called off the attack and fled, hurling imprecations as he went. The large man approached Ezio and the women, grinning broadly.

'I'm glad I came out to meet you,' he said. 'Looks as if I arrived just in time.'

'You have my thanks, whoever you are.'

The man laughed again, and there was something familiar about his voice.

'Do I know you?' asked Ezio.

'It's been a long time. But still I'm surprised you don't recognize your own uncle!'

'Uncle Mario?'

'The same!'

He gave Ezio a bear-hug, and then approached Maria and Claudia. Distress clouded his face when he saw the condition Maria was in. ‘Listen, child –’ he said to Claudia. ‘I’m going to take Ezio back to the *castello* now, but I’m leaving my men to guard you, and they will give you something to eat and drink. I’ll send a rider ahead and he’ll return with a carriage to bring you the rest of the way. You’ve done enough walking for one day and I can see that my poor sister-in-law is…’ he paused before adding delicately, ‘tired out.’

‘Thank you, Uncle Mario.’

‘It’s settled then. We’ll see you very soon.’ He turned and issued orders to his men, then put an arm round Ezio and guided him in the direction of his castle, which dominated the little town.

‘How did you know I was on my way?’ asked Ezio.

Mario looked a little evasive. ‘Oh – a friend in Florence sent a messenger on horseback ahead of you. But I already knew what had happened. I haven’t the strength to march on Florence but now Lorenzo’s back let us pray he can keep the Pazzi in check. You’d better fill me in on my brother’s fate – and that of my nephews.’

Ezio paused. The memory of his kinsmen’s death still haunted the darkest part of his memories.

‘They… They were all executed for treason…’ He paused. ‘I escaped by the purest chance.’

‘My God,’ mouthed Mario, his face contorted with pain. ‘Do you know why this happened?’

‘No – but it is something I hope you may be able to help me find answers to.’ And Ezio went on to tell his uncle about the hidden chest in the family palazzo and its contents, and of his revenge on Alberti and the documents he had taken from him. ‘The most important-looking is a list of names,’ he added, then broke off in grief. ‘I cannot believe this has befallen us!’

Mario patted his arm. ‘I know something of your father’s business,’ he said, and it occurred to Ezio that Mario hadn’t shown much surprise when he’d told him of the hidden chest in the secret chamber. ‘We’ll make sense of this. But we must also make sure your mother and sister are properly provided for. My castle is not much of a place for women of any quality, and soldiers like me never really settle down; but there is a convent about a mile away where they will be completely safe and well cared for. If you agree, we will send them there. For you and I have much to do.’

Ezio nodded. He would see them settled and persuade Claudia that it was the best temporary solution, for he could not see her wanting to remain long in such seclusion.

They were approaching the little town.

‘I thought Monteriggioni was an enemy of Florence,’ Ezio said.

‘No so much of Florence as of the Pazzi,’ his uncle told him. ‘But you are old enough to know about alliances between city-states, whether they are big ones or small ones. One year there is a friendship, the next, enmity; and the following year there is friendship again. And so it seems to go on for ever, like a mad game of chess. But you’ll like it here. The people are honest and hard-working, and the goods we produce are solid and hard-wearing. The priest is a good man, doesn’t drink too much, and minds his own business. And I mind mine, around him – but I’ve never been a very devoted son of the Church myself. Best of all is the wine – the best Chianti you will ever taste comes from my own vineyards. Come, just a little further, and we’ll be there.’

Mario’s castle was the ancient seat of the Auditori and had been built in the 1250s, though the site had originally been occupied by a much more ancient construction. Mario had refined and added to the building, which nowadays had more of the appearance of an opulent villa, though its walls were high, many feet in thickness, and well fortified. Before it and in place of a garden was a large practice-field, where Ezio could see a couple of dozen young armed men engaged in various exercises to improve their fighting technique.

‘*Casa, dolce casa*,’ said Mario. ‘You haven’t been here since you were a little boy. Been some changes since then. What do you think?’

‘It’s most impressive, Uncle.’

The rest of the day was filled with activity. Mario showed Ezio around the castle, organized his accommodation, and made sure that Claudia and Maria had been safely housed in the nearby convent, whose abbess was an old and dear friend (and, it was rumoured, long ago a mistress) of Mario. But the following morning he was summoned early to his uncle’s workroom, a large, high-ceilinged place, whose walls were festooned with maps, armour and weapons, and furnished with a heavy oak table and chairs.

‘You’d better get into the town quickly,’ Mario said one day soon afterwards in a businesslike voice. Get yourself properly kitted out. I’ll send one of my men with you. Come back here when you’ve finished and we’ll begin.’

‘Begin what, Uncle?’

Mario looked surprised. ‘I thought you’d come here to train.’

‘No, Uncle – that was not my intention. This was the first place of safety I could think of once we had to flee Florence. But my intention is to take my mother and sister further still.’

Mario looked grave. ‘But what about your father? Don’t you think he’d want you to finish his work?’

‘What – as a banker? The family business is over – the House of Auditore is no more, unless Duke Lorenzo has managed to keep it out of Pazzi hands.’

‘I wasn’t thinking of that,’ began Mario, and then interrupted himself. ‘Do you mean to say Giovanni never told you?’

‘I am sorry, Uncle, but I have no idea what you are talking about.’

Mario shook his head. ‘I don’t know what your father must have been thinking of. Perhaps he judged the time not to be right. But events have overtaken any such consideration now.’ He looked hard at Ezio. ‘We must talk, long and hard. Leave me the documents you have in your pouch. I must study them while *you* go into the town and get yourself equipped. Here’s a list of what you’ll need, and money to pay for it.’

In a confused mood, Ezio set off for the town in the company of one of Mario’s sergeants, a grizzled veteran called Orazio, and under his guidance acquired from the armourer there a battle-dagger, light body-armour, and – from the local doctor – bandages and a basic medical kit. He returned to the castle to find Mario waiting impatiently for him.

‘*Salute*,’ said Ezio. ‘I have done as you requested.’

‘And quickly too. *Ben fatto!* And now, we must teach you properly how to fight.’

‘Uncle, forgive me, but as I told you, I have no intention of staying.’

Mario bit his lip. ‘Listen, Ezio, you were barely able to hold your own against Vieri. If I hadn’t arrived when I did…’ He broke off. ‘Well, leave if you must, but at least first learn the skills and knowledge you’ll need to defend yourself, or you won’t last a week on the road.’

Ezio was silent.

‘If not for me, do it for the sake of your mother and sister,’ Mario pressed him.

Ezio considered his options, but he had to admit that his uncle had a point. ‘Well, then,’ he said. ‘Since you’ve been kind enough to see me kitted out.’

Mario beamed and clapped him on the shoulder. ‘Good man! You’ll live to thank me!’

In the following weeks the most intensive instruction in the use of arms followed, but while he was learning new battle skills, Ezio was also finding out more about his family background, and the secrets his father had not had time to divulge to him. And, as Mario let him have the run of his library, he gradually became troubled by the fact that he might be on the verge of a far more important destiny than he had believed possible.

‘You say my father was more than just a banker?’ he asked his uncle.

‘Far more,’ replied Mario gravely. ‘You father was a highly trained killer.’

‘That cannot be – my father was always a financier, a businessman… how could he have possibly been a killer?’

‘No, Ezio, he was much more than that. He was born and bred to kill. He was a senior member of the Order of Assassins.’ Mario hesitated. ‘I know you must have found out something more about all this in the library. We must discuss the documents that were entrusted to you, and which you – thank God! – had the wit to retrieve from Alberti. That list of names – it isn’t a catalogue of debtors, you know. It carries the names of all those responsible for your father’s murder – and they are men who form part of a still greater conspiracy.’

Ezio struggled to take it all in – everything he thought he knew about his father, his family, it all now seemed to be a half-truth. How could his father have kept this from him? It was all so inconceivable, so alien. Ezio chose his words with care – his father must have had a reason for this secrecy. ‘I accept that there was more to my father than I ever knew, and forgive me for doubting your word, but why is the need for secrecy so great?’

Mario paused before replying. ‘Are you familiar with the Order of the Knights Templar?’

‘I have heard of them.’

‘They were founded many centuries ago, soon after the First of the Crusades, and became an elite fighting force of warriors for God – effectively they were monks in armour. They took a pledge of abstinence and a vow of poverty. But the years rolled by, and their status changed. In time, they became involved in international finance, and very successful they were at it, too. Other Orders of Knights – the Hospitallers and the Teutonic Knights – looked on them askance, and their power began to be a cause for concern, even to kings. They established a base in southern France, and planned to form their own state. They paid no taxes, supported their own private army, and began to lord it over everyone. At last, nearly two hundred years ago, King Philip the Fair of France moved against them. There was a terrible purge, the Templars were arrested and driven away, massacred, and at last excommunicated by the Pope. But they could not all be rooted out – they had fifteen thousand chapters throughout Europe. Nevertheless, with their estates and properties annexed, the Templars seemed to disappear, their power apparently broken.’

‘What happened to them?’

Mario shook his head. ‘Of course, it was a ruse to ensure their own survival. They went underground, hoarding the riches they had salvaged, maintaining their organization, and bent more than ever now on their true goal.’

‘And what was that?’

‘What *is* that, you mean!’ Mario’s eyes blazed. ‘Their intention is nothing less than world domination. And only one organization is devoted to thwarting them. The Order of the Assassins, to which your father – and I – have the honour to belong.’

Ezio needed a moment to take this in. ‘And was Alberti one of the Templars?’

Mario nodded solemnly. ‘Yes. As are all the others on your father’s list.’

‘And – Vieri?’

‘He is one as well, and his father Francesco, and all the Pazzi clan.’

Ezio pondered this. ‘That explains much…’ he said. ‘There is something I haven’t shown you yet –’

He rolled up his sleeve to reveal his secret dagger.

‘Ah,’ said Mario. ‘You were wise not to reveal that until you were sure you could trust even me completely. I was wondering what had become of it. And I see that you have had it repaired. It was your father’s, given to him by our father, and to him by his. It was broken in… a confrontation your father was involved in many years ago, but he could never find a craftsman skilled or trustworthy enough to restore it. You have done well, my boy.’

‘Even so,’ said Ezio. ‘All this talk of Assassins and Templars sounds like something from an ancient tale – it reeks of the fantastic.’

Mario smiled. ‘Like something from an old parchment covered in arcane writing, perhaps?’

‘You know of the Codex page?’

Mario shrugged. ‘Had you forgotten? It was with the papers you handed over to me.’

‘Can you tell me what it is?’ Ezio was somehow reluctant to involve his friend Leonardo in this unless it became strictly necessary.

‘Well, whoever repaired your blade must have been able to read at least some of it,’ said Mario, but he raised his hand as Ezio was about to open his mouth. ‘But I will ask you no questions. I can see that you wish to protect someone, and I will respect that. But there is more to the page than the working instructions for your weapon. The pages of the Codex are scattered now throughout Italy. It is a guide to the inner workings of the Assassins’ Order, its origin, purpose and techniques. It is, if you will, our Creed. Your father believed that the Codex contained a powerful secret. Something that would change the world.’ He paused for thought. ‘Perhaps that is why they came for him.’

Ezio was overwhelmed at this information – it was a huge amount to take in all at once. ‘Assassins, Templars, this strange Codex –’

‘I will be your guide, Ezio. But you must first learn to open your mind, and always remember this: nothing is true. Everything is permitted.’

Mario would tell him nothing more then, though Ezio pressed him. Instead, his uncle continued to put him through the most rigorous process of military training, and from dawn to dusk he found himself exercising with the young *condottieri* on the practice-ground, falling into bed each night too exhausted to think of anything but sleep. And then, one day…

'Well done, nephew!' his uncle told him. 'I think you are ready.'

Ezio was pleased. 'Thank you, Uncle, for all you've given me.'

Mario's answer was to give the boy a bear-hug. 'You are family! Such is my duty and desire!'

'I'm glad you persuaded me to stay.'

Mario looked at him keenly. 'So – have you reconsidered your decision to leave?'

Ezio returned his gaze. 'I am sorry, Uncle, but my mind is made up. For the safety of Mamma and Claudia – I still intend to make for the coast and take ship for Spain.'

Mario did not hide his displeasure. 'Forgive me, nephew, but I have not taught you the skills you now have either for my own amusement or your exclusive benefit. I have taught you so that you may be better prepared to strike against our enemies.'

'And, if they find me, so I will.'

'So,' Mario said bitterly. 'You want to leave? To throw away everything your father fought and died for? To deny your very heritage? Well! I cannot pretend to you that I am not disappointed – highly disappointed. But so be it. Orazio will take you to the convent when you judge the moment to be right for your mother to travel, and he will see you on your way. I wish you *buona fortuna*.'

With that, Mario turned his back on his nephew and stalked away.

More time passed, as Ezio found he had to allow his mother enough peace and quiet to pave the way to her recovery. He himself made his preparations for leaving with a heavy heart. At last he set out to pay what he imagined might be his last visit to the convent to visit his mother and sister before taking them away, and found them better than he'd dared to hope. Claudia had made friends with some of the younger nuns, and it was clear to Ezio, to his surprise and not greatly to his pleasure, that she was beginning to be attracted to the life. Meanwhile his mother was making a steady but slow recovery, and the abbess, on hearing of his plans, demurred, advising him that rest was what she still badly needed, and that she should not be moved again just yet.

When he returned to Mario's castle, therefore, he was full of misgivings, and he was aware that these misgivings had grown with time.

At that period, some kind of military preparations had been going on in Monteriggioni, and now they seemed to be coming to a head. The sight of them distracted him. His uncle was nowhere to be seen, but he managed to track Orazio down to the map-room.

‘What’s going on?’ he asked. ‘Where’s my uncle?’

‘He’s preparing for battle.’

‘What? With whom?’

‘Oh, I expect he’d have told you if he’d thought you were staying. But we all know that that is not your intention.’

‘Well…’

‘Listen, your old friend Vieri de’ Pazzi has set himself up at San Gimignano. He’s tripling the garrison there and has let it be known that as soon as he’s ready, he’s coming to raze Monteriggioni to the ground. So we’re going there first, to crush the little snake and teach the Pazzi a lesson they won’t forget in a hurry.’

Ezio took a deep breath. Surely this changed everything. And perhaps it was Fate – the very stimulus he’d unconsciously been seeking. ‘Where is my uncle?’

‘In the stables.’

Ezio was already halfway out of the room.

‘Hey! Where are you off to?’

‘To the stables! There must be a horse for me, too!’

Orazio smiled as he watched him go.

7

Mario, with Ezio riding at his side, led his forces to within sight of San Gimignano in the middle of a spring night in 1477. It was to be the beginning of a tough confrontation.

‘Tell me again what made you change your mind,’ said Mario, still much pleased by his nephew’s change of heart.

‘You just like to hear it.’

‘What if I do? Anyway, I knew it’d take Maria a good while to recover, and they are safe enough where they are, as you well know.’

Ezio smiled. ‘As I’ve already told you, I wanted to take responsibility. As I’ve already told you, Vieri troubles *you* because of *me*.’

‘And as I’ve told you, young man, you certainly have a healthy sense of your own importance. The truth is, Vieri troubles us because he is a Templar and we are Assassins.’

As he spoke, Mario was scanning the tall towers, built close together, of San Gimignano. The square-built structures seemed almost to scrape the sky, and Ezio had a strange sense of having seen such a view before, but it must have been either in a dream or in another life, for he had no precise memory of the occasion.

The tops of the towers were each aflame with torch-light, and there were many other torches visible on the battlements of the town walls, and at its gates.

‘He’s well garrisoned,’ said Mario. ‘And to judge by the torches it looks as if Vieri may well be expecting us. It’s a pity, but I’m not surprised. After all, he has his spies just as I have mine.’ He paused. ‘I can see archers on the ramparts, and the gates are heavily guarded.’ He continued to scan the city. ‘But even so, it looks as if he hasn’t got enough men to cover every gate sufficiently. The one on

the south side looks less well defended – it must be the place he expects an attack to be least likely. So that is where we'll strike.'

He raised an arm and kicked his horse's flanks. His force moved forward behind him. Ezio rode beside him. 'This is what we'll do,' said Mario, his voice urgent. 'My men and I will engage the guards at the gate, while you must find a way over the wall and get the gate opened from the inside. We must be silent and swift.'

He unslung a bandolier of throwing-knives and handed it to Ezio. 'Take these. Use them to dispatch the archers.'

As soon as they were close enough, they dismounted. Mario led a group of his best soldiers towards the cohort of guards posted at the southern entrance to the town. Ezio left them, and hurried the last hundred yards on foot, using the cover of bushes and shrubs to conceal his progress, until he found himself at the foot of the wall. He had his hood up, and by the light of the torches at the gate he could see that the shadow cast by his hood on the wall bore a strange resemblance to an eagle's head. He looked up. The wall rose sheer above him, fifty feet or more. He couldn't see if anyone was on the battlements above. Slinging his bandolier securely, he began to climb. It was hard, as the walls were of dressed stone and gave few opportunities for footholds, but embrasures near the top allowed him to gain a firm place to lodge himself while he peered warily over the battlements' edge. Along the rampart to his left, two archers, their backs to him, were leaning over the wall, bows drawn. They had seen Mario's attack begin, and were preparing to fire down on the Assassin *condottieri*. Ezio did not hesitate. It was their lives or those of his friends, and now he appreciated the new skills his uncle had insisted on teaching him. Quickly, concentrating his mind and his eye in the flickering semi-darkness, he drew two knives and threw them, one after the other, with deadly accuracy. The first struck an archer in the nape of the neck – the blow fatal in an instant. The man slumped over the crenellations without a whisper. The next knife flew a little lower, catching the second man full in the back with such force that, with a hollow cry, he pitched forward into the blackness beneath.

Below him, at the foot of a narrow stone stairway, lay the gate, but now he appreciated that Vieri's force was not enough to guard the city with absolute efficiency, for there were no soldiers posted on its interior side. He bounded down the steps three at a time, seeming almost to fly, and soon located the lever that operated the heavy iron bolts which locked the solid, ten-foot-high oak doors. He pulled it, needing all his strength to do so, for it was not designed to yield to the force of just one man, but at last the job was done, and he hauled on one of the massive rings which were set into the doors at shoulder height. It

gave, and the gate began to swing open, revealing as it did so that Mario and his men were just completing their bloody task. Two Assassin men lay dead, but twenty of Vieri's force had been sent to their Maker.

'Well done, Ezio!' Mario cried softly. So far, no alarm seemed to have been raised, but it would only be a matter of time.

'Come on!' said Mario. 'Silently, now!' He turned to one of his sergeants and said, 'Go back and bring the main force up.'

Then he led the way carefully through the silent streets – Vieri must have imposed some kind of curfew, for there was no one to be seen. Once, they almost fell foul of a Pazzi patrol. Shrinking back into the shadows, they let it pass, before rushing up from the rear to attack the men and bring them down with clinical efficiency.

'What next?' Ezio asked his uncle.

'We need to locate the captain of the guard here. His name's Roberto. He'll know where Vieri is.' Mario was showing more stress than usual. 'This is taking too long. It'll be better if we split up. Look, I know Roberto. At this time of night, he'll either be drunk in his favourite taverna or he'll be already sleeping it off in the citadel. You take the citadel. Take Orazio and a dozen good men with you.' He looked at the sky, which was just beginning to lighten, and tasted the air, which already carried the coolness of a new day in it. 'Meet me by the cathedral before cock-crow to report. And don't forget – I leave you in command of this gang of hooligans!' He smiled affectionately at his men, took his own force, and disappeared along a street that led uphill.

'The citadel's in the north-west of the town – sir,' said Orazio. He grinned, as did the others. Ezio sensed both their obedience to Mario, and their misgivings at having been entrusted to the command of such an untried officer.

'Then let's go,' Ezio replied firmly. 'Follow me. At my signal.'

The citadel formed one side of the town's main square, not far from the cathedral and near the top of the small hill on which the town was built. They reached it without difficulty, but before they entered it Ezio noticed a number of Pazzi guards posted at its entrance. Motioning his men to stay back, he approached them, keeping to the shadows and silent as a fox, until he was close enough to overhear the conversation which was going on between two of them. It was clear that they were unhappy with Vieri's leadership, and the more vehement of the two was in full flow.

'I tell you, Tebaldo,' the former was saying, 'I'm not happy with that young puppy Vieri. I don't think he could aim his piss into a bucket, let alone defend a town against a determined force. As for Capitano Roberto, he drinks so much he's like a bottle of Chianti dressed in a uniform!'

‘You talk too much, Zohane,’ cautioned Tebaldo. ‘Remember what happened to Bernardo when he dared to open his mouth.’

The other checked himself, and nodded soberly. ‘You are right… I heard Vieri had him blinded.’

‘Well, I’d like to keep my eyesight, thank you very much, so we should end this talk. We don’t know how many of our comrades feel like us, and Vieri has spies everywhere.’

Satisfied, Ezio made his way back to his own troop. An unhappy garrison is rarely an efficient one; but there was no guarantee that Vieri did not command a strong loyal core of Pazzi adherents. As for the rest of Vieri’s men, Ezio had learned for himself how strong a commander fear itself can be. But the task now was to gain access to the citadel. Ezio scanned the square. Apart from the small force of Pazzi guards, it was dark and empty.

‘Orazio?’

‘Yessir?’

‘Will you engage these men and finish them off? Quickly and silently. I’m going to try to get up on the roof and see whether they’ve got any more people posted in the courtyard.’

‘It’s what we came here to do, sir.’

Leaving Orazio and his soldiers to take on the guards, Ezio, checking that he still had sufficient throwing-knives in his bandolier, ran a little way into a side street adjacent to the citadel, climbed to a nearby roof, and from it leapt to the roof of the citadel, which was built round its own interior courtyard. He thanked God that Vieri had evidently neglected to post men in the high towers of the houses of the dominant local families, which punctuated the town, since from that vantage point they could have surveyed everything that was going on. But he also knew that gaining control of those towers would be the first objective of Mario’s main force. From the roof of the citadel, he could see that the courtyard was deserted, leapt down to the top of its colonnade, and from there dropped to the ground. It was an easy manoeuvre to open the gates, and to position his men, who had dragged the bodies of the defeated Pazzi patrol out of sight, in the shadows of the colonnade. To avoid suspicion, they had reclosed the citadel gates behind them.

The citadel seemed, to all intents and purposes, deserted. But soon afterwards there came the sound of voices from the square beyond, and another group of Vieri’s men appeared, opening the gates and entering the courtyard, supporting among them a thickset man, running to fat, who was clearly drunk.

‘Where’ve the gate guards buggered off to?’ the man wanted to know. ‘Don’t say Vieri’s countermanded me and sent them off on another one of his bloody

patrols!’

‘*Ser* Roberto,’ one of the men supporting him pleaded. ‘Isn’t it time you got some rest?’

‘Whaddyew mean? Made it back here just fine, didn’t I? Anyway, night’s still young!’

The new arrivals managed to seat their chief on the edge of the fountain in the middle of the courtyard and gathered round, uncertain what to do next.

‘Anyone would think I’m not a good captain!’ said Roberto, self-pityingly.

‘Nonsense, sir!’ said the man closest to him.

‘Vieri thinks I’m not,’ said Roberto, ‘You should hear the way he talks to me!’ He paused, looking round and trying to focus before continuing in a maudlin tone: ‘It’s only a matter of time before I’m replaced – or worse!’ He stopped again, snuffling. ‘Where’s that bloody bottle? Give it here!’ He drank a deep draught, looked at the bottle to assure himself that it was empty, and flung it away. ‘It’s Mario’s fault! I couldn’t believe it when our spies reported that he’d taken his nephew in – rescued the little bugger from Vieri himself! Now Vieri can scarcely think straight for rage, and I have to face my old *compagno*!’ He looked around blearily. ‘Dear old Mario! We were brothers-in-arms once, did you know that? But he refused to come over to the Pazzi with me, even though it was better money, better quarters, better equipment – the lot! I wish he were here now. For two pins, I’d –’

‘Excuse me,’ Ezio interrupted, stepping forward.

‘Wha– ?’ said Roberto. ‘Who’re you?’

‘Allow me to introduce myself. I’m Mario’s nephew.’

‘What?’ Roberto roared, struggling to his feet and grabbing unsuccessfully for his sword. ‘Arrest the little tyke!’ He leant close, so that Ezio could smell the sour wine on his breath. Onions, too. ‘You know what, Ezio,’ he smiled. ‘I should be grateful to you. Now that I’ve got you, there’s nothing Vieri wouldn’t give me. Maybe I’ll retire. A nice little villa on the coast, perhaps –’

‘Don’t count your chickens, *Capitano*,’ said Ezio. Roberto spun round to see what his men had already discovered: that they were surrounded by Assassin mercenaries, all armed to the teeth.

‘Ah,’ said Roberto, sinking down again. All the fight seemed to have gone out of him.

Once the Pazzi guards had been manacled and taken to the citadel’s dungeon, Roberto, provided with a fresh bottle, sat with Ezio at a table in a room off the courtyard, and talked. At last Roberto was convinced.

‘You want Vieri? I’ll tell you where he is. It’s all up with me anyway. Go to the Palazzo of the Dolphin in the square near the northern gate. There’s a

meeting being held there…'

'Who is he meeting? Do you know?'

Roberto shrugged. 'More of his people from Florence, I think. Supposed to be bringing reinforcements with them.'

They were interrupted by Orazio, looking worried. 'Ezio! Quickly! There's a battle going on over by the cathedral. We'd better get going!'

'All right! Let's go!'

'What about him?'

Ezio looked at Roberto. 'Leave him. I think he may have chosen the right side at last.'

As soon as he was out in the square, Ezio could hear the noise of fighting coming from the open space in front of the cathedral. Drawing nearer, he saw that his uncle's men, their backs to him, were being forced to retreat by a large brigade of Pazzi troops. Using his throwing-knives to clear a path, he fought his way to his uncle's side and told him what he'd learned.

'Good for Roberto!' said Mario, barely missing a beat, as he cut and sliced at his attackers. 'I always regretted his going over to the Pazzi, but he's turned up trumps at last. Go! Find out what Vieri's up to.'

'But what about you? Will you be able to hold them off?'

Mario looked grim. 'For a while at least, but our main force should have secured most of the towers by now, and then they'll be here to join us. So make haste, Ezio! Don't let Vieri escape!'

The palazzo lay in the extreme north of the city, far from the fighting, though the Pazzi guards here were numerous – probably the reinforcements of whom Roberto had spoken – and Ezio had to pick his way carefully to avoid them.

He arrived just in time: the meeting appeared to be over, and he could see a group of four robed men making their way to a group of tethered horses. Ezio recognized Jacopo de' Pazzi, his nephew, Francesco, Vieri himself, and – he let out a gasp of surprise – the tall Spaniard who had been present at his father's execution. To his further surprise, Ezio noticed the arms of a cardinal embroidered on the shoulder of the man's cloak. The men drew to a halt by the horses, and Ezio managed to reach the cover of a nearby tree to see if he could catch anything of their conversation. He had to strain, and the words came in snatches, but he overheard enough to intrigue him.

'Then it's settled,' the Spaniard was saying. 'Vieri, you will remain here and re-establish our position as soon as possible. Francesco will organize our forces in Florence for the moment when the right time comes to strike, and you, Jacopo, must be prepared to calm the populace once we have seized control. Do

not hurry things: the better planned our action is, the greater the likelihood of success.'

'But, *Ser* Rodrigo,' put in Vieri, 'what am I to do with that *ubriacone*, Mario?'

'Get rid of him! There is no way that he must learn of our intentions.' The man they called Rodrigo swung himself up into the saddle. Ezio saw his face clearly for a moment, the cold eyes, the aquiline nose, and guessed him to be in his mid-forties.

'He's always been trouble,' snarled Francesco. 'Just like that *bastardo* of a brother of his.'

'Don't worry, *padre*,' said Vieri. 'I will soon reunite them – in death!'

'Come,' said the man they called Rodrigo. 'We have stayed too long.' Jacopo and Francesco mounted their steeds beside him, and they turned towards the northern gate, which the Pazzi guards were already opening. 'May the Father of Understanding guide us all!'

They rode out and the gates closed again behind them. Ezio was wondering whether now would be a good opportunity to try to cut Vieri down, but he was too well guarded, and besides, it might be better to take him alive and question him. But he carefully made a mental note of the names of the men he had overheard, intending to add them to his father's list of enemies, for clearly a conspiracy was afoot in which they were all involved.

As it was, he was interrupted by the arrival of a further squad of Pazzi guards, the leader of which approached Vieri at a run.

'What is it?' snapped Vieri.

'*Commandante*, I bring bad news. Mario Auditore's men have broken through our last defences.'

Vieri sneered. 'That's what he thinks. But see,' he waved at the strong force of men around him, 'more men have arrived from Florence. We will sweep him out of San Gimignano before the day is done like the vermin he is!' He raised his voice to the assembled soldiers. 'Hurry to meet the enemy!' he cried. 'Crush them like the scum they are!'

Raising a harsh battle-cry, the Pazzi militia formed up under their officers and moved away from the north gate southwards through the city to encounter Mario's *condottieri*. Ezio prayed that his uncle would not be taken unawares, for now he would be severely outnumbered. But Vieri had remained behind, and, alone now except for his personal bodyguard, was making his way back into the safety of the palazzo. No doubt he still had some business pertaining to the meeting to conclude there. Or perhaps he was returning to strap on his armour for the fray. Either way, soon, the sun would be up. It was now or never. Ezio stepped out of the darkness, pulling back the cowl from over his head.

‘Good morning, *Messer* de’ Pazzi,’ he said. ‘Had a busy night?’

Vieri rounded on him – a combination of shock and terror flickering across his face for an instant. He regained his composure, and blustered, ‘I might have known you’d turn up again. Make your peace with God, Ezio – I’ve more important things than you to deal with now. You’re just a pawn to be swept off the board.’

His guards rushed Ezio, but he was ready for them. He brought down the first of them with his last throwing-knife – the small blade scything through the air with a devilish zinging sound. Then he drew his sword and battle-dagger and closed with the rest of the guards. He cut and thrust like a madman in a swirl of blood, his movement economical and lethal, until the last, badly wounded, limped away to safety. But now Vieri was on him, wielding a cruel-looking battleaxe he’d seized from the saddle of his horse, which still stood where the others had been tethered. Ezio swerved to avoid his deadly aim, but the blow, though it glanced off his body-armour, still sent him reeling and he fell, letting his sword drop. In a moment, Vieri stood over him, kicking the sword out of reach, the axe raised above his head. Summoning his remaining strength, Ezio aimed a kick at his opponent’s groin, but Vieri saw it coming and jumped back. As Ezio took the chance to regain his feet, Vieri threw his axe at his left wrist, knocking the battle-dagger out of it and cutting a deep wound in the back of his left hand. Vieri drew his own sword and dagger.

‘If you want a job doing well, do it yourself,’ Vieri said. ‘Sometimes I wonder what I pay these so-called bodyguards for. Goodbye, Ezio!’ And he closed on his enemy.

The heat of pain had seared through the young man’s body as the axe had slashed his hand, making his head swim and his vision white-out. But now he remembered all that he had been taught, instinct taking over. He shook himself, and in the moment when Vieri poised himself to deliver the fatal blow on his supposedly unarmed opponent, Ezio flexed his right hand, spreading his fingers up and open. Instantaneously, the mechanism of his father’s concealed dagger clicked, the blade shooting out from under his fingers, extending to its full and lethal length, the dull metal belying the vicious edge.Vieri’s arm was raised. His flank was open. Ezio plunged the dagger into his side – the blade slipping in without the least resistance.

Vieri stood for a moment transfixed, then, dropping his weapons, fell to his knees. Blood flowed like a waterfall from between his ribs. Ezio caught him as he sank to the ground.

‘You don’t have much time, Vieri,’ he said urgently. ‘Now it is *your* chance to make your peace with God. Tell me, what were you discussing? What are your

plans?’

Vieri answered him with a slow smile. ‘You will never defeat us,’ he said. ‘You will never conquer the Pazzi and you will certainly never conquer Rodrigo Borgia.’

Ezio knew he had only moments before he’d be talking to a corpse. He persisted with even greater urgency. ‘Tell me, Vieri! Had my father discovered your plans? Is that why your people had him killed?’

But Vieri’s face was ashen. He grasped Ezio’s arm tightly. A trickle of blood spilled from the corner of his mouth and his eyes were beginning to glaze. Still, he managed an ironic smile. ‘Ezio, what are you hoping for – a full confession? I’m sorry, but I just don’t have… the time…’ He gasped for breath and more blood flowed from his mouth. ‘A pity, really. In another world, we might even have been… friends.’

Ezio felt the grip on his arm relax.

But then the pain of his wound welled up again, together with the stark memory of the death of his kinsmen, and he was riven with a cold fury. ‘Friends?’ he said to the corpse. ‘Friends! You piece of shit! Your body should be left on the side of a road to rot like a dead crow! Nobody will miss you! I only wish you’d suffered more! I –’

‘Ezio,’ said a strong, gentle voice behind him. ‘Enough! Show the man some respect.’

Ezio stood and whirled round to confront his uncle. ‘Respect? After all that’s happened? Do you think, if he’d won, he wouldn’t have hanged us from the nearest tree?’

Mario was battered, covered with dust and blood, but he stood firm.

‘But he didn’t win, Ezio. And you are not like him. Do not become a man like he was.’ He knelt by the body, and with a gloved hand reached down and closed its eyes. ‘May death provide the peace your poor, angry soul sought,’ he said. ‘*Requiescat in pace*.’

Ezio watched in silence. When his uncle stood up, he said, ‘Is it over?’

‘No,’ replied Mario. ‘There is still fierce fighting. But the tide is turning in our favour, Roberto has brought some of his men over to our side, and it is only a matter of time.’ He paused. ‘You will I am sure be grieved to know that Orazio is dead.’

‘Orazio – !’

‘He told me what a brave man you were before he died. Live up to that praise, Ezio.’

‘I will try.’ Ezio bit his lip. Though he did not acknowledge it consciously, this was another lesson learned.

‘I must rejoin my men. But I have something for you – something that will teach you a little more about your enemy. It’s a letter we took from one of the priests here. It was intended for Vieri’s father, but Francesco, evidently, is no longer here to receive it.’ He handed over a paper, the seal broken open. ‘This same priest will oversee the funeral rites. I’ll get one of my sergeants to make the arrangements.’

‘I have things to tell you –’

Mario raised his hand. ‘Later, when our business here is finished. After this setback, our enemies won’t be able to move as fast as they’d hoped, and Lorenzo in Florence will be very much on his guard. For the moment, we have the advantage of them.’ He stopped. ‘But I must get back. Read the letter, Ezio, and reflect on what it says. And see to your hand.’

He was gone. Ezio moved away from Vieri’s body and sat beneath the tree he had hidden behind earlier. Flies were already hovering round Vieri’s face. Ezio opened the letter and read:

> Messer *Francesco:*
> *I have done as you requested and spoken with your son. I agree with your assessment, though only in part. Yes, Vieri is brash, and prone to act without forethought; and he has a habit of treating his men like playthings, like chesspieces for whose lives he shows no more concern than if they were made of ivory or wood. And his punishments are indeed cruel: I have received reports of at least three men being disfigured as a result.*
>
> *But I do not think him, as you put it, beyond repair. Rather, I believe the solution to be a simple matter. He seeks your approval. Your attention. These outbursts of his are a result of insecurities borne of a sense of inadequacy. He speaks of you fondly and often, and expresses a desire to be closer to you. So, if he is loud and foul and angry, I believe it is simply because he wants to be noticed. He wants to be loved.*
>
> *Act as you see fit on the information I’ve given you here, but now I must ask that we end this correspondence. Were he to discover the nature of our discourse, I candidly fear what might become of me.*
>
> *Yours in confidence,*
> *Father Giocondo*

Ezio sat for a long while after having read the letter, thinking. He looked at Vieri’s body. There was a wallet at his belt he had not noticed before. He walked over and took it, returning to his tree to examine its contents. There was a miniature picture of a woman, some florins in a pouch, a little notebook that had not been used, and, carefully rolled, a piece of vellum. With trembling hands, Ezio opened it, and immediately recognized what it was. A page of the Codex…

The sun rose higher, and a group of monks appeared with a wooden stretcher on which they laid Vieri’s body, and carried it away.

As spring turned to summer again, and the mimosa and azaleas had given way to lilies and roses, an uneasy peace returned to Tuscany. Ezio was content to see

that his mother continued in her recovery, though her nerves had been so shattered by the tragedy that had struck her that now it seemed to him she might never leave the peaceful calm of the convent. Claudia was considering taking the first vows that would lead to her novitiate, a prospect that pleased him less, but he knew that she had been born with as stubborn a streak as his own, and that to try to thwart her would merely strengthen her resolve.

Mario had spent the time ensuring that San Gimignano, now under the sober and reformed control of his old comrade, Roberto, and its territory, no longer posed a threat, and that the last pockets of Pazzi resistance had been weeded out. Monteriggioni was safe, and after the victory celebrations had been concluded, Mario's *condottieri* were allowed a well-earned furlough, using it according to their tastes by spending time with their families, or drinking, or whoring, but never neglecting their training; and their squires kept their weapons sharp and their armour free from rust, as the masons and carpenters ensured that the fortifications of both town and castle were well maintained. To the north, the external threat that might have been posed by France was in abeyance, since King Louis was busy getting rid of the last of the English invaders, and facing up to the problems the Duke of Burgundy was causing him; while to the south, Pope Sixtus IV, a potential ally of the Pazzi, was too busy promoting his relatives and supervising the construction of a magnificent new chapel in the Vatican to give much thought to interference in Tuscany.

Mario and Ezio had had many and long conversations, however, regarding the threat that they knew had not disappeared.

'I must tell you more of Rodrigo Borgia,' Mario told his nephew. 'He was born in Valencia, but studied law in Bologna and has never returned to Spain, since he is better placed to pursue his ambitions here. At the moment, he is a prominent member of the Curia in Rome, but his sights are always set higher. He is one of the most powerful men in all Europe, but he is more than a cunning politician within the Church.' He lowered his voice. 'Rodrigo is the leader of the Order of the Templars.'

Ezio felt his heart turn over in his body. 'That explains his presence at the murder of my poor father and my brothers. He was behind it.'

'Yes, and he won't have forgotten you, especially as it was largely thanks to you that he lost his power-base in Tuscany. And he knows the stock you come from, and the danger you continue to pose him. Be fully aware, Ezio, that he will have you killed as soon as he gets the chance.'

'Then I must stand against him if I wish ever to be free.'

'He must remain in our sights, but we have other business nearer home first, and we have stayed our hand long enough. Come to my study.'

They made their way from the garden where they had been walking into an inner room of the castle, at the end of a corridor that led from the map-room. It was a quiet place, dark without being gloomy, book-lined and more like the room of an *accademico* than a military commander. Its shelves also contained artefacts that looked as if they might have come from Turkey or Syria, and volumes that Ezio could see from the writing on their spines were written in Arabic. He had asked his uncle about them, but received only the vaguest of replies.

Once there, Mario unlocked a chest and from it drew a leather document wallet from which he took a sheaf of papers. Among them were some Ezio recognized immediately. ‘Here is your father’s list, my boy – though I should not call you that any more, for you are a man now, and a full-blooded warrior – and to it I have added the names you told me of in San Gimignano.’ He looked at his nephew, and handed him the document. ‘It is time for you to begin your work.’

‘Every Templar on it shall fall to my blade,’ said Ezio, evenly. His eye lit on the name of Francesco de’ Pazzi. ‘Here, with him, I will start. He is the worst of the clan and fanatical in his hatred of our allies, the Medici.’

‘You are right to say so,’ Mario agreed. ‘So, you will make your preparations for Florence?’

‘That is my resolve.’

‘Good. But there is more you must learn if you are to be fully equipped. Come.’ Mario turned to a bookcase and touched a hidden button set into its side. On silent hinges it swung out and open to reveal a stone wall beyond, on which a number of square slots had been marked out. Five were filled. The rest were empty.

Ezio’s eyes gleamed as he saw it. The five filled spaces were occupied with pages of the Codex!

‘I see you recognize what this is,’ said Mario. ‘And I am not surprised. After all, there is the page your father left you, which your clever friend in Florence managed to decode, and these, which Giovanni managed to find and translate before he died.’

‘And the one I took from Vieri’s body,’ added Ezio. ‘But its contents are still a mystery.’

‘Alas, you are right. I am not the scholar your father was, though with every page that is added, and with the help of the books in my study, I am getting closer to unravelling the mystery. Look! Do you see the way the words cross from one page to the next, and how the symbols join?’

Ezio looked hard, an eerie feeling of remembrance flooding his brain, as though a hereditary instinct was reawakening – and with this the scrawls on the

pages of the Codex seemed to come alive, their intentions untwisting in front of his eyes. ‘Yes! And there seems to be part of a picture of some sort underneath it – look, it’s like a map!’

‘Giovanni – and now I – managed to make out what appears to be a kind of prophecy written across these pages, but what it refers to I have yet to learn. Something about “*a piece of Eden*”. It was written long ago, by an Assassin like us, whose name appears to have been Altair. And there is more. He goes on to write of “*something hidden beneath the earth, something as powerful as it is old*” – but we have yet to discover what.’

‘Here is Vieri’s page,’ said Ezio. ‘Add it to the wall.’

‘Not yet! I will copy it before you go, but take the original to your friend in Florence with the brilliant mind. He need not know the full picture, at least, what there is of it so far, and indeed it may be dangerous for him to have such knowledge. Later, Vieri’s parchment will join the others on this wall, and we will be a little closer to deciphering the mystery.’

‘What of the other pages?’

‘They are yet to be rediscovered,’ said Mario. ‘Do not concern yourself. For you must concentrate on the undertaking you have immediately before you.’

8

Ezio had preparations to make before he left Monteriggioni. He had much more to learn, at his uncle's side, of the Assassin's Creed, the better to equip himself for the task that faced him. There was also the need to ensure that it would be at least relatively safe for him in Florence, and there was the question of where he might lodge, since Mario's spies within the town had reported that his family palazzo had been closed and boarded up, though it remained under the protection and guard of the Medici family and so had been left unmolested. Several delays and setbacks made Ezio increasingly impatient, until, one morning in March, his uncle told him to pack his bags.

'It's been a long winter –' Mario said.

'Too long,' put in Ezio.

'– but now all is settled,' continued his uncle. 'And I would remind you that meticulous preparation accounts for most victories. Now, pay attention! I have a friend in Florence who has arranged a secure lodging for you not far from her own house.'

'Who is she, Uncle?'

Mario looked furtive. 'Her name is of no consequence to you, but you have my word that you can trust her as much as you would trust me. In any case she is presently away from the town. If you have need of help, get in touch with your old housekeeper, Annetta, whose address has not changed and who now works for the Medici, but it would be best if as few people as possible in Florence knew of your presence there. There is, however, one person you *must* contact, though he isn't easy to reach. I've written his name down here. You must ask around for him discreetly. Try asking your scientific friend while you're showing him the Codex page, but don't let him know too much, for his own good! And

here, by the way, is the address of your lodgings.' He handed Ezio two slips of paper and a bulging leather pouch. 'And one hundred florins to get you started, and your travelling papers, which you will find in order. The best news of all is that you may set off tomorrow!'

Ezio used the short time left to ride to the convent to take his leave of his mother and sister, to pack all his essential clothing and equipment, and to say goodbye to his uncle and the men and women of the town who had been his companions and allies for so long. But it was with a joyful and determined heart that he saddled his horse and rode forth from the castle gates at dawn the following morning. It was a long but uneventful day's ride, and by dinner-time he was settled in his new quarters and ready to re-acquaint himself with the city which had been his home all his life, but which he had not seen for so long. But this wasn't a sentimental return, and once he had found his feet again, and permitted himself one sad walk past the façade of his old family home, he made his way straight to Leonardo da Vinci's workshop, not forgetting to take Vieri de' Pazzi's page of the Codex with him.

Leonardo had expanded into the property to the left of his own since Ezio had gone away, a vast warehouse with ample room for the physical results of the artist's imaginings to take shape. Two long trestle tables ran from one end of the place to the other, lit by oil-lamps and by windows set high in the walls – Leonardo had no need of prying eyes. On the tables, hanging from the walls, and scattered, partly assembled, in the middle of the room, were a confusing number of devices, machines and bits of engineering equipment, and pinned to the walls were hundreds of drawings and sketches. Among this pandemonium of creativity, half a dozen assistants busied and scuttled, overseen by the slightly older, but no less attractive, Agniolo and Innocento. Here, there was a model of a wagon, except that it was round, bristled with weapons, and was covered with an armoured canopy in the shape of a raised cooking pot lid, at the top of which was a hole through which a man might stick his head to ascertain what direction the machine was going in. There, the drawing of a boat in the shape of a shark but with an odd tower on its back. More oddly still, it looked from the drawing as if the boat were sailing underwater. Maps, anatomical sketches showing everything from the working of the eye, to coitus, to the embryo in the womb – and many others which it was beyond Ezio's imagination to decipher – crowded all available wall-space, and the samples and clutter piled on the tables reminded Ezio of the organized chaos he remembered from his last visit here, but multiplied one hundredfold. There were precisely figured images of animals, from the familiar to the supernatural, and designs for everything from water-pumps to defensive walls.

But what caught Ezio's eye most was hanging low from the ceiling. He had seen a version of it before, he remembered, as a smallish model, but this looked like a half-scale mock-up of what might one day be a real machine. It still looked like the skeleton of a bat, and some kind of durable animal skin had been stretched tightly over the frames of two wooden projections. Nearby was an easel with some paperwork attached to it. Among the notes and calculations, Ezio read:

> … spring of horn or of steel fastened upon wood of willow encased in reed.
>
> The impetus maintains the birds in their flying course during such time as the wings do not press the air, and they even rise upwards.
>
> If a man weigh two hundred pounds and is at point *n*, and raises the wing with his block, which is one hundred and fifty pounds, with power amounting to three hundred pounds he would raise himself with two wings…

It was all Greek to Ezio, but at least he could read it – Agniolo must have transcribed it from Leonardo's impenetrable scrawl. In that moment he saw Agniolo looking at him, and hastily turned his attention elsewhere. He knew how secretive Leonardo liked to be.

Presently Leonardo himself arrived from the direction of the old studio and bustled up to Ezio, embracing him warmly. 'My dear Ezio! You're back! I am so glad to see you. After all that's happened, we thought…' But he let the sentence hang there, and looked troubled.

Ezio tried to lighten his mood again. 'Look at this place! Of course I can't make head or tail of any of it, but I suppose you know what you're doing! Have you given up painting?'

'No,' said Leonardo. 'Just following up… on other things… that've caught my attention.'

'So I see. And you've expanded. You must be prospering. The past two years have been good to you.'

But Leonardo could see both the underlying sadness and the severity that had settled in Ezio's face now. 'Perhaps,' said Leonardo. 'They leave me alone. I imagine they think I'll be useful to whoever wins absolute control one day… Not that I imagine anyone ever will.' He changed. 'But what of you, my friend?'

Ezio looked at him. 'There will be time, I hope, one day to sit down and talk over all that has happened since we last met. But now, I need your help again.'

Leonardo spread his hands. 'Anything for you!'

'I have something to show you which I think will interest you.'

'Then you had better come to my studio – it is less busy there.'

Once back in Leonardo's old quarters, Ezio produced the Codex page from his wallet and spread it on the table before them.

Leonardo's eyes widened with excitement.

'You remember the first one?' asked Ezio.

'How could I forget?' The artist gazed at the page. 'This is most exciting! May I?'

'Of course.'

Leonardo studied the page carefully, running his fingers over the parchment. Then, drawing paper and pens towards him, he began to copy the words and symbols down. Almost immediately, he was darting to and fro, consulting books and manuscripts, absorbed. Ezio watched him work with gratitude and patience.

'This is interesting,' said Leonardo. 'Some quite unknown languages here, at least to me, but they do yield a kind of pattern. Hmmn. Yes, there's a gloss here in Aramaic which makes things a bit clearer.' He looked up. 'You know, taking this with the other page, you'd almost think they were part of a guide – on one level, at least – a guide to various forms of assassination. But of course there's far more to it than that, though I have no idea what. I just know that we're only scratching the surface of what this may have to reveal. We'd need to have the whole thing complete, but you've no idea where the other pages are?'

'None.'

'Or how many in the complete volume?'

'It is possible that… that that may be known.'

'Aha,' said Leonardo. 'Secrets! Well, I must respect them.' But then his attention was caught by something else. 'But look at this!'

Ezio looked over his shoulder but could see nothing but a succession of closely grouped, wedge-shaped symbols. 'What is it?'

'I can't quite make it out, but if I'm right this section contains a formula for a metal or an alloy that we know nothing of – and that, logically, shouldn't *possibly* exist!'

'Is there anything else?'

'Yes – the easiest bit to decipher. It's basically the blueprint for another weapon, and it seems to complement the one you already have. But this one we'll have to make from scratch.'

'What kind of weapon?'

'Fairly simple, really. It's a metal plate encased in a leather bracer. You'd wear it on your left forearm – or your right if you were left-handed, like me – and use it to ward off blows from swords or even axes. The extraordinary thing is that although it's evidently very strong, the metal we're going to have to cast is also incredibly light. And it incorporates a double-bladed dagger, spring-loaded like the first.'

'Do you think you can make it?'

‘Yes, though it will take a little time.’

‘I haven’t much of that.’

Leonardo pondered. ‘I think I have all I need here, and my men are skilled enough to forge this.’ He thought for a moment, his lips moving as he made calculations. ‘It will take two days,’ he decided. ‘Come back then and we’ll see if it works!’

Ezio bowed. ‘Leonardo, I am most grateful. And I can pay you.’

‘I am grateful to *you*. This Codex of yours expands my knowledge – I fancied myself an innovator, but I find much in these ancient pages to intrigue me.’ He smiled, and murmured almost to himself. ‘And you, Ezio, cannot guess how indebted I am to you for showing them to me. Let me see any more that you may find – where they come from is your business. I am only interested in what they contain, and that no one else outside your inner circle, apart from me, should know about them. That is all the recompense I require.’

‘That is indeed a promise.’

‘*Grazie!* Until Friday, then – at sunset?’

‘Until Friday.’

Leonardo and his assistants discharged their commission well. The new weapon, though it was defensive in application, was extraordinarily useful. Leonardo’s younger assistants mock-attacked Ezio, but using real weapons, including double-handed swords and battle-axes, and the wrist plate, light as it was and easy to wield, easily deflected the heaviest blows.

‘This is an amazing armament, Leonardo.’

‘Indeed.’

‘And it may well save my life.’

‘Let’s hope you get no more scars like the one across the back of your left hand,’ said Leonardo.

‘That is a last souvenir from an old… friend,’ said Ezio. ‘But now I need one more piece of advice from you.’

Leonardo shrugged. ‘If I can help you, I will.’

Ezio glanced over at Leonardo’s assistants. ‘Perhaps in private?’

‘Follow me.’

Back in the studio, Ezio unwrapped the slip of paper Mario had given him and handed it to Leonardo. ‘This is the person my uncle told me to meet. He told me it’d be no good to try to find him directly –’

But Leonardo was staring at the name on the paper. When he looked up, his face was filled with anxiety. ‘Do you know who this is?’

‘I read the name – *La Volpe*. I guess it’s a nickname.’

‘The Fox! Yes! But do not speak it aloud, or in public. He is a man whose eyes are everywhere, but who himself is never seen.’

‘Where might I find him?’

‘It is impossible to say, but if you wanted to make a start – and be very careful – you should try the district of the Mercato Vecchio –’

‘But every thief who isn’t either in gaol or on the gallows hangs out there.’

‘I told you you’d need to be careful.’ Leonardo looked round as if he were being overheard. ‘I… might be able to get word to him… Go and look for him tomorrow after Vespers… Perhaps you will be fortunate… perhaps not.’

Despite his uncle’s warning, there was one person in Florence whom Ezio was determined to see again. In all the time of his absence, she had never been far from his heart, and now the pangs of love had increased with the knowledge that she was not far away. He could not take too many risks in the city. His face had changed, become more angular, as he had grown both in experience and years, but he was still recognizable as Ezio. His hood helped, allowing him to ‘disappear’ in a crowd, and he wore it low; but he knew that, although the Medici now held sway, the Pazzi had not had all their teeth drawn. They were biding their time, and they would remain vigilant: of those two things he was certain, just as he was certain that if they caught him unawares, they would kill him, Medici or no Medici. Nevertheless, the following morning he could no more prevent his feet taking the way to the Calfucci mansion than he could have flown to the moon.

The main street doors stood open, revealing the sunlit courtyard beyond, and there she was, slimmer, possibly taller, her hair up, no longer a girl but a woman. He called her name.

When she saw him she turned so pale he thought she was going to faint, but she rallied, said something to her attendant to make her go away, and came out to him, her hands outstretched. He drew her quickly out of the street into the secluded shelter of an archway nearby, whose yellow stones were festooned with ivy. He stroked her neck, and noticed that the thin chain to which his pendant was attached was still around her neck, though the pendant itself was hidden in her bosom.

‘Ezio!’ she cried.

‘Cristina!’

‘What are you doing here?’

‘I am here on my father’s business.’

‘Where have you *been*? I have had no word of you for two *years*.’

‘I have been… away. Also on my father’s business.’

‘They said you must be dead – and your mother and sister.’

‘Fate dealt with us differently.’ He paused. ‘I could not write, but you have never left my thoughts.’

Her eyes, which had been dancing, suddenly clouded and looked troubled.

‘What is it, *carissima*?’ he asked.

‘Nothing.’ She tried to break free. He would not let her.

‘Clearly it’s something. Tell me!’

She met his eyes, and her own filled with tears. ‘Oh, Ezio! I’m engaged to be married!’

Ezio was too taken aback to answer. He let go of her arms, realizing that he was holding her too tightly, hurting her. He saw the lonely furrow he had to plough, stretching ahead of him.

‘It was my father,’ she said. ‘He kept on and on at me to choose. You were gone. I thought you were dead. Then my parents began to entertain visits from Manfredo d’Arzenta – you know, the son of the bullion people. They moved here from Lucca soon after you left Florence. Oh, God, Ezio, they kept asking me not to let the family down, to make a good match while I still could. I thought I’d never see you again. And now –’

She was interrupted by a girl’s voice, crying out in panic at the end of the street, where there was a little square.

Cristina became instantly tense. ‘That’s Gianetta – do you remember her?’

They could hear more screams and yells now, and Gianetta called out a name – ‘Manfredo!’

‘We’d better see what’s going on,’ said Ezio, making his way down the street in the direction of the fracas. In the square, they found Cristina’s friend Gianetta, another girl whom Ezio did not recognize, and an elderly man who, he remembered, had worked as Cristina’s father’s head clerk.

‘What’s going on?’ said Ezio.

‘It’s Manfredo!’ cried Gianetta. ‘Gambling debts again! This time, they’re going to kill him for sure!’

‘What?’ cried Cristina.

‘I am so sorry, *signorina*,’ said the clerk. ‘Two men to whom he owes money. They’ve dragged him off to the foot of the New Bridge. They said they were going to beat the debt out of him. I am so sorry, *signorina*. I could do nothing.’

‘That’s all right, Sandeo. Go and call the house guards. I’d better go and –’

‘Wait a minute,’ put in Ezio. ‘Who the devil is Manfredo?’

Cristina looked at him as if from the inner side of prison bars. ‘My *fidanzato*,’ she said.

‘Let me see what I can do,’ said Ezio, and rushed away down the street that led in the direction of the bridge. A minute later, he stood at the top of the

embankment looking down at the narrow strip of land near the first arch of the bridge, close to the heavy, slow-moving, yellow waters of the Arno. There, a young man clad in elegant black and silver was on his knees. Two more young men were sweating and grunting as they kicked him hard, or bent down to pummel him with their fists.

'I'll pay it back, I swear!' groaned the young man in black and silver.

'We've had enough of your excuses,' said one of his tormentors. 'You've made us look very foolish. So now we're going to make an example of you.' And he raised his boot to the young man's neck, pushing him face down in the mud, while his companion kicked him in the ribs.

The first attacker was about to stamp on the young man's kidneys when he felt himself grabbed by the scruff of the neck and his coat-tails. Someone was lifting him high up – and the next thing he knew, he was flying through the air, landing seconds later in the water among the sewage and debris that had washed up around the foot of the first pier of the bridge. He was too busy choking on the disgusting water that had poured into his mouth to notice that his companion had by now suffered the same fate.

Ezio reached a hand down to the mud-spattered young man and hauled him to his feet.

'*Grazie, signore*. I think they really would have killed me this time. But they'd have been fools if they had. I could have paid them – honestly!'

'Aren't you afraid they'll come after you again?'

'Not now they think I've got a bodyguard like you.'

'I haven't introduced myself: Ezio – de Castronovo.'

'Manfredo d'Arzenta, at your service.'

'I'm not your bodyguard, Manfredo.'

'It doesn't matter. You got those clowns off my back, and I'm grateful. You don't know how much. In fact, you must let me reward you. But first, let me get cleaned up and take you for a drink. There's a little gaming-house just off the Via Fiordaliso –'

'Now, just a minute,' said Ezio, aware that Cristina and her companions were approaching.

'What is it?'

'Do you do a lot of gambling?'

'Why not? It's the best way I know of passing the time.'

'Do you love her?' Ezio cut in.

'What do you mean?'

'Your *fidanzata* – Cristina – *do you love her*?'

Manfredo looked alarmed at his rescuer's sudden vehemence. 'Of course I do – if it's any of your business. Kill me here and I'd die still loving her.'

Ezio hesitated. It sounded as though the man was telling the truth. 'Then listen: you are never going to gamble again. Do you hear?'

'Yes!' Manfredo was frightened.

'Swear!'

'I do!'

'You do not know how lucky a man you are. I want you to promise me to be a good husband to her. If I hear that you are not, I will hunt you down and kill you myself.'

Manfredo could see that his rescuer meant every word he had said. He looked into the cold grey eyes, and something in his memory stirred. 'Do I not know you?' he said. 'There's something about you. You seem familiar.'

'We have never met before,' said Ezio. 'And we need never meet again, unless…' he broke off. Cristina was waiting at the end of the bridge, looking down. 'Go to her, and keep your promise.'

'I will.' Manfredo hesitated. 'I really do love her, you know. Perhaps I really have learned something today. And I will do everything in my power to make her happy. I need no threat to my life to make me promise that.'

'I hope so. Now, go!'

Ezio watched Manfredo climb the embankment for a moment, feeling his eyes irresistibly drawn to Cristina's. Their gaze met for a moment and he half-raised a hand in farewell. Then he turned and walked away. Not since the deaths of his kinsmen had his heart been so heavy.

Saturday evening found him still cast in deep gloom. At the darkest moments it seemed to him that he had lost everything – father, brothers, home, status, career – and now, wife! But then he reminded himself of the kindness and protection Mario had afforded him, and of his mother and sister, whom he had been able to save and protect. As for future and career – he still had both, except that they were running in a very different direction from that in which he had hitherto imagined they would run. He had a job to do, and no pining over Cristina would help him finish it. It would be impossible for him ever to cut her out of his heart, but he would have to accept the lonely destiny Fate had accorded him. Perhaps that was the way of the Assassin? Perhaps that was what adherence to the Creed involved?

He made his way to the Mercato Vecchio in a sombre mood. The district was shunned by most people he knew, and he himself had only once visited it before. The old market square was dingy and neglected, as were the buildings and streets that surrounded it. A number of people were passing to and fro, but this

was no *passeggiata*. These people walked with a purpose, wasting no time, and kept their heads down. Ezio had taken care to dress simply, and had not worn a sword, though he had buckled on his new wrist plate and his original spring-blade dagger too, in case of need. Still, he knew that he must stand out from the crowd around him, and he was on the alert.

He was wondering what course to take next, and was thinking of going into a low alehouse on the corner of the square to see if he could find out obliquely by what means he could make contact with the Fox, when a slim young man suddenly appeared from nowhere and jostled him.

'*Scusi*, *signore*,' said the young man politely, smiling, and moved swiftly past him. Instinctively, Ezio's hand went to his belt. His precious belongings he had left safely stowed at his lodgings, but he had brought a few florins with him in his belt-purse, and now it was gone. He spun round to see the young man heading towards one of the narrow streets that led off the square, and gave chase. Seeing him, the thief doubled his pace, but Ezio managed to keep him in sight and ran after him, catching up with him at last and collaring him as he was about to enter a tall, nondescript tenement on Via Sant' Angelo.

'Give it back,' he snarled.

'I don't know what you mean,' retorted the thief, but his eyes were scared.

Ezio, who had been on the point of releasing his dagger, reined in his anger. The man, it suddenly occurred to him, might be able to give him the information he sought. 'I have no interest in hurting you, friend,' he said. 'Just give me back my purse and we'll say no more.'

After hesitating, 'You win,' said the young man, ruefully, reaching for the satchel at his side.

'There's just one thing,' Ezio said.

The man was instantly wary. 'What?'

'Do you know where I might find a man who calls himself *La Volpe*?'

Now the man looked seriously frightened. 'Never heard of him. Here, take your money, *signore*, and let me go!'

'Not until you've told me.'

'Just a minute,' said a deep, throaty voice behind him. 'I may be able to help you.'

Ezio turned to see a broad-shouldered man of similar height to his own but perhaps ten or fifteen years older than he was. Over his head he wore a hood not unlike Ezio's, which partly obscured his face, but under it Ezio could make out two piercing violet eyes which shone with a strange power, boring into him.

'Please let my colleague go,' said the man. 'I'll answer for him.' To the young thief he said, 'Give the gentleman his money, Corradin, and make yourself

scarce. We'll talk of this later.' He spoke with such authority that Ezio released his grasp. In a second Corradin had placed Ezio's purse in his hand and vanished into the building.

'Who are you?' Ezio asked.

The man smiled slowly. 'My name is Gilberto, but they call me many things: murderer, for example, and *tagliagole*; but to my friends I am simply known as the Fox.' He bowed slightly, still holding Ezio with those penetrating eyes of his. 'And I am at your service, *Messer* Auditore. Indeed, I have been expecting you.'

'How – how do you know my name?'

'It is my business to know everything in this city. And I know, I think, why you believe I can help you.'

'My uncle gave me your name –'

The Fox smiled again, but said nothing.

'I need to find someone – to be one step ahead of him as well, if I can.'

'Who is it you seek?'

'Francesco de' Pazzi.'

'Big game, I see.' The Fox looked serious. 'It may be that I *can* help you.' He paused, considering. 'I have had word that some people from Rome recently disembarked at the docks. They are here to attend a meeting which no one else is supposed to know about, but they do not know about me, still less that I am the eyes and ears of this city. The host of this meeting is the man you want.'

'When is it to take place?'

'Tonight!' The Fox smiled again. 'Don't worry, Ezio – it isn't Fate. I would have sent someone to fetch you to me if you hadn't found me yourself, but it amused me to test you. Very few who seek me succeed.'

'You mean, you set me up with Corradin?'

'Forgive me my sense of the theatrical; but I also had to be sure *you* were not followed. He's a young man, and it was also a kind of test for him. You see, I may have set you up with him, but he had no real idea of the service he was doing me. He just thought I'd singled out a victim for him!' His tone became harder, more practical. 'Now, you must find a way to spy on this meeting, but it won't be easy.' He looked at the sky. 'It is sunset. We must hurry, and the quickest way is over the rooftops. Follow me!'

Without another word he turned and scaled the wall behind him at such a speed that Ezio was hard put to keep up. They raced over the red-tiled roofs, leaping the chasms of the streets in the last afterglow of the sun, silent as cats, soft-footed as running foxes, heading north-west across the city, until they arrived in sight of the façade of the great church of Santa Maria Novella. Here

the Fox came to a halt. Ezio had caught him up in seconds, but he noticed that he was more breathless than the older man.

'You've had a good teacher,' said the Fox; but Ezio had the distinct impression that if he had so chosen, his new friend could have outrun him with ease; and that increased his determination to hone his skills further. But now wasn't the time for contests or games.

'That is where *Messer* Francesco is holding his meeting,' said the Fox, pointing downwards.

'In the church?'

'Under it. Come on!'

At that hour, the piazza in front of the church was all but deserted. The Fox leapt down from the roof they were on, landing gracefully in a crouch, and Ezio followed suit. They skirted the square and the side of the church until they came to a postern-gate set into its wall. The Fox ushered Ezio through it and they found themselves in the Rucellai Chapel. Near the bronze tomb at its centre, the Fox paused. 'There is a network of catacombs which crisscross the city far and wide. I find them very useful in my line of work, but unfortunately they are not exclusive to me. Not many know about them, however, or how to find their way about in them, but Francesco de' Pazzi is one. It is down there that he is holding his meeting with the people from Rome. This is the closest entrance to where they will be, but you will have to make your own way to them. There's a chapel, part of an abandoned crypt, fifty yards to your right once you have descended, and be very careful, for sound travels very acutely down there. It will be dark, too, so allow your vision to become accustomed to the gloom – soon you will be guided by the lights in the chapel.'

He placed his hand over a stone boss on the pedestal that supported the tomb, and pressed it. At his feet, an apparently solid flagstone swung down on invisible hinges to reveal a flight of stone steps. He stood aside. '*Buona fortuna*, Ezio.'

'You are not coming?'

'It is not necessary. And even with all my skills, two people make more noise than one. I will wait for you here. *Va*, go!'

Once below ground, Ezio groped his way along the damp stone corridor that ran away to his right. He was able to feel his way along, for the walls were close enough here for him to touch either side with each hand, and he was relieved that his feet made no sound on the wet earthen floor. Occasionally, other tunnels branched off and he could feel them rather than see them as his guiding hands touched nothing but a black void. Getting lost down here would be a nightmare, for one would never find one's way out again. Little sounds startled him at first, until he realized that they were nothing but the scuttling of rats, though once,

when one ran over his feet, he could barely stifle a cry. In niches carved into the walls, he caught glimpses of the corpses from timeworn burials, their skulls shrouded in cobwebs – there was something primordial and terrifying about the catacombs, and Ezio had to bite back a rising sense of panic.

At last he saw a dim light ahead, and, moving more slowly now, advanced towards it. He stayed in the shadows as he came within earshot of the five men he could see ahead, silhouetted in the lamplight of a cramped, and very ancient, chapel.

He recognized Francesco immediately – a small, wiry, intense creature who, as Ezio arrived, was bowed before two tonsured priests he did not recognize. The older of the two was giving the blessing in a clear, nasal voice: '*Et benedictio Dei Omnipotentis, Patris et Filii et Spiritu Sancti descendat super vos et maneat semper*…' As his face caught the light, Ezio recognized him; he was Stefano da Bagnone, secretary to Francesco's uncle Jacopo. Jacopo himself stood near him.

'Thank you, *padre*,' said Francesco when the blessing was concluded. He straightened himself and addressed a fourth man, who was standing beside the priests. 'Bernardo, give us your report.'

'Everything is in readiness. We have a full armoury of swords, staves, axes, bows and crossbows.'

'A simple dagger would be best for the job,' put in the younger of the two priests.

'It depends on the circumstances, Antonio,' said Francesco.

'Or poison,' continued the younger priest. 'But it doesn't matter, as long as he dies. I will not easily forgive him for bringing down Volterra, my birthplace and my only true home.'

'Calm yourself,' said the man called Bernardo. We all have motive enough. Now, thanks to Pope Sixtus, we also have the means.'

'Indeed, *Messer* Baroncelli,' replied Antonio. 'But do we have his blessing?'

A voice came from the deep shadows beyond the lamplight at the rear of the chapel, 'He gives his blessing to our operation, "provided that nobody is killed".'

The owner of the voice emerged into the lamplight and Ezio drew in his breath as he recognized the cowled figure in crimson, though all of his face but the sneer on his lips was covered by the shadow of his hood. So this was the principal visitor from Rome: Rodrigo Borgia, *il Spagnolo*!

The conspirators all shared his knowing smile. They all knew where the Pope's loyalty lay, and that it was the cardinal who stood before them who

controlled him. But naturally, the Supreme Pontiff could not openly condone the spilling of blood.

'It's good that the job can be done at last,' said Francesco. 'We've had enough setbacks. As it is, killing them in the cathedral will draw heavy criticism on us.'

'It is our last and only option,' said Rodrigo, with authority. 'And as we are doing God's work in ridding Florence of such scum, the setting is appropriate. Besides, once we control the city, let the people murmur against us – if they dare!'

'Still, they keep changing their plans,' said Bernardo Baroncelli. 'I'm even going to have to have someone call on his younger brother Giuliano to make sure he's up in time for High Mass.'

All the men laughed at that, except Jacopo and the Spaniard, who had noticed his sober expression.

'What is it, Jacopo?' Rodrigo asked the older Pazzi. 'Do you think they suspect something?'

Before Jacopo could speak, his nephew waded in impatiently. 'It's impossible! The Medici are too arrogant or too stupid even to notice!'

'Do not underestimate our enemies,' Jacopo chided him. 'Don't you see that it was Medici money that funded the campaign against us at San Gimignano?'

'There will be no such problems this time,' snarled his nephew, bridling at having been corrected in front of his peers, and with the memory of his son Vieri's death still green in his mind.

In the silence that followed, Bernardo turned to Stefano de Bagnone. 'I'll need to borrow a set of your priestly robes for tomorrow morning, *padre*. The more they think they're surrounded by clerics, the safer they'll feel.'

'Who will strike?' asked Rodrigo.

'I!' said Francesco.

'And I!' chimed in Stefano, Antonio and Bernardo.

'Good.' Rodrigo paused. 'I think on the whole daggers *would* be best. So much easier to conceal, and very handy when close work is involved. But it's still good to have the Pope's armoury as well – I don't doubt but there'll be a few loose ends to clear up once the Medici brothers are no more.' He raised his hand and made the sign of the cross over his fellow conspirators. '*Dominus vobiscum*, gentlemen,' he said. 'And may the Father of Understanding guide us.' He looked around. 'Well, I think that concludes our business. You must forgive me if I take my leave of you now. There are several things I need to do before I return to Rome, and I must be on my way before dawn. It wouldn't do at all for me to be seen in Florence on the day the House of Medici crumbled to dust.'

Ezio waited, pressed against a wall in the shadows, until the six men had departed, leaving him in darkness. Only when he was quite sure that he was fully alone did he produce his own lamp and strike a tinder to its wick.

He made his way back the way he had come. The Fox was waiting in the shadowy Rucellai chapel. Ezio, with a full heart, told him what he had heard.

'… To murder Lorenzo and Giuliano de' Medici in the cathedral at High Mass tomorrow morning?' said the Fox when Ezio had finished, and Ezio could see that for once the man was almost at a loss for words. 'It is sacrilege! And it is worse than that – if Florence should fall to the Pazzi, then God help us all.'

Ezio was lost in thought. 'Can you get me a seat in the cathedral tomorrow?' he asked. 'Close to the altar. Near the Medici?'

The Fox looked grave. 'Hard, but perhaps not impossible.' He looked at the young man. 'I know what you're thinking, Ezio, but this is something you cannot possibly pull off alone.'

'I can try, and I have the element of surprise. And more than one stranger's face among the *aristocrazia* near the front might arouse the Pazzis' suspicions. But you must get me in there, Gilberto.'

'Call me the Fox,' Gilberto answered him, then grinning, 'Only foxes can match me for cunning.' He paused. 'Meet me in front of the Duomo half an hour before High Mass.' He looked Ezio in the eye with new respect. 'I will help if I can, *Messer* Ezio. Your father would have been proud of you.'

9

Ezio arose before dawn the following day, Sunday 26 April, and made his way to the cathedral. Very few people were about, though a handful of monks and nuns were making their way to perform the rite of Lauds. Aware that he should avoid notice, he climbed arduously to the very top of the campanile and watched the sun rise over the city. Gradually, beneath him, the square began to fill with citizens of every description, families and couples, merchants and nobles, eager to attend the main service of the day, graced as it would be by the presence of the Duke and his younger brother and co-ruler. Ezio surveyed the people keenly, and when he saw the Fox arrive on the cathedral steps, he made his way to the side of the tower least in view and clambered down, agile as a monkey, to join him, remembering to keep his head low and to blend in as far as was possible with the crowd, using his fellow-citizens as cover. He had put on his best clothes for the occasion, and wore no weapon openly, though many of his male fellow citizens, of the wealthy merchant and banking class, had ceremonial swords at their waistbands. He could not resist keeping an eye out for Cristina, but he did not see her.

‘Here you are,’ said the Fox, as Ezio joined him. ‘All the arrangements have been made, and a place reserved for you on the aisle in the third row.’ As he spoke, the crowd on the steps parted, and a row of heralds raised trumpets to their lips and blew a fanfare. ‘They’re coming,’ he added.

Entering the square from the Baptistry side, Lorenzo de’ Medici appeared first with his wife Clarice at his side. She held little Lucrezia, their oldest, by the hand, and five-year-old Piero marched proudly on his father’s right. Behind them, accompanied by her nurse, came three-year-old Maddalena, while baby Leo, swaddled in white satin, was carried by his. They were followed by

Giuliano and his heavily pregnant mistress, Fioretta. The mass of people in the square bowed low as they passed, to be met at the entrance to the Duomo by two of the attendant priests, whom Ezio recognized with a thrill of horror – Stefano da Bagnone and the one from Volterra, whose full name, as the Fox told him, was Antonio Maffei.

The Medici family entered the cathedral, followed by the priests, and they were followed by the citizens of Florence, in order of rank. The Fox nudged Ezio and pointed. Among the throng he had spotted Francesco de' Pazzi and his fellow conspirator, Bernardo Baroncelli, disguised as a deacon. 'Go now,' he hissed urgently to Ezio. 'Keep close to them.'

More and more people crowded into the cathedral until it could hold no more, so that those who had hoped for a place had to be content to remain outside. Ten thousand people had gathered in all, and the Fox had never seen such a great assembly in Florence in all his life. He prayed silently for Ezio's success.

Inside, the crowd settled in the stifling heat. Ezio had not been able to get as close to Francesco and the others as he had wished, but kept them under close eye, calculating what he would have to do to reach them as soon as they started their attack. The Bishop of Florence, meanwhile, had taken his place before the high altar, and the Mass began.

It was at the point when the Bishop was blessing the bread and wine that Ezio noticed Francesco and Bernardo exchange glances. The Medici family was seated just in front of them. At the same moment, the priests Bagnone and Maffei, on the lower steps of the altar, and closest to Lorenzo and Giuliano, looked round surreptitiously. The bishop turned to face the congregation, raised aloft the golden goblet, and started to speak.

'The Blood of Christ…'

Then everything happened at once. Baroncelli sprang to his feet with a cry of '*Creapa, traditore*!' and plunged a dagger into Giuliano's neck from behind. A fountain of blood spewed from the wound, showering Fioretta, who fell screaming to her knees.

'Let me finish the bastard!' yelled Francesco, elbowing Baroncelli aside and throwing Giuliano, who was trying to staunch his wound with his hands, to the floor. Francesco knelt astride him and plunged his dagger over and over again into his victim's body, in such a frenzy that once, without seeming to notice, he drove his weapon into his own thigh. Giuliano was long dead before Francesco had struck him the nineteenth, and last, blow.

Meanwhile Lorenzo, with a cry of alarm, had spun round to face his brother's attackers, while Clarice and the nurses bundled the children and Fioretta to safety. There was confusion everywhere. Lorenzo had spurned the idea of having

his bodyguards close – a murderous attack in a church was a thing all but unheard of – but now they struggled to reach him through the mass of confused and panic-stricken worshippers, jostling and trampling each other in order to get away from the scene of butchery, but the situation was made far worse by the heat, and the fact that there was scarcely any room to move at all…

Except for the area immediately in front of the altar. The Bishop and his attendant priests stood aghast, rooted to the spot, but Bagnone and Maffei, seeing Lorenzo's back turned to them, seized their opportunity and, drawing daggers from their robes, fell on him from behind.

Priests are rarely experienced killers, and however noble they believed their cause to be, the two managed only to give Lorenzo flesh wounds before he shook them off. But in the struggle they got the better of him again, and now Francesco, limping from his self-inflicted wound but empowered by all the hatred that was boiling within him, was closing in too, roaring imprecations as he came, raising his dagger. Bagnone and Maffei, unmanned by what they had done, turned and fled in the direction of the apse; but Lorenzo was staggering, blood pouring from him, and a cut high on the right shoulder had made his sword-arm useless.

'Your day is done, Lorenzo!' Francesco screamed. 'Your entire misbegotten family dies by my sword!'

'*Infame*!' returned Lorenzo. 'I'll kill you now!'

'With that arm?' sneered Francesco, and raised his dagger to strike.

As his fist plunged down, a strong hand caught his wrist and arrested its motion, before flinging him round. Francesco found himself looking into the face of another sworn enemy.

'Ezio!' he growled. 'You! Here!'

'It's *your* day that is done, Francesco!'

The crowd was clearing, and Lorenzo's guards were pushing closer. Baroncelli had arrived at Francesco's side. 'Come, we must fly. It's over!' he shouted.

'I'll deal with these curs first,' said Francesco, but his face was drawn. His own wound was bleeding hard.

'No! We must retreat!'

Francesco looked furious, but there was agreement in his face. 'This isn't over,' he told Ezio.

'No, it isn't. Wherever you go, I will follow, Francesco, until I have cut you down.'

Glaring, Francesco turned and followed Baroncelli, who was already vanishing behind the high altar. There had to be a door out of the cathedral in the

apse. Ezio prepared to follow.

‘Wait!’ a broken voice behind him said. ‘Let them go. They won’t get far. I need you here. I need your help.’

Ezio turned to see the Duke sprawled on the ground between two overturned chairs. Not far away, his family huddled and wept, Clarice, a look of horror on her face, embracing her two oldest children tightly. Fioretta was staring dully in the direction of Giuliano’s twisted and mangled corpse.

Lorenzo’s guards had arrived. ‘Look after my family,’ he told them. ‘The city will be in uproar over this. Get them to the palazzo and bar the doors.’

He turned to Ezio. ‘You saved my life.’

‘I did my duty! Now the Pazzi must pay the full price!’ Ezio helped Lorenzo up, and placed him gently on a chair. Looking up, he saw that the Bishop and the other priests were nowhere to be seen. Behind him, people were still pushing and shoving, clawing at each other, to get out of the cathedral by the main western doors. ‘I must go after Francesco!’ he said.

‘No!’ said Lorenzo. ‘I can’t make it to safety on my own. You must help me. Get me to San Lorenzo. I have friends there.’

Ezio was torn, but he knew how much Lorenzo had done for his own family. He could not blame him for failing to prevent the deaths of his kinsmen, for how could anyone have predicted the suddenness of that attack? And now Lorenzo himself was the victim. He was still alive, too; but he would not be for long unless Ezio could get him to the nearest place where he could be treated. The church of San Lorenzo was only a short distance north-west of the Baptistry.

He bound Lorenzo’s wounds as best he could, with strips torn from his own shirt. Then he lifted him gently to his feet. ‘Put your left arm round my shoulder. Good. Now, there must be a way out beyond the altar…’

They hobbled in the direction their assailants had taken, and soon came to a small open door with bloodstains on its threshold. This was no doubt the way Francesco had gone. Might he be lying in wait? It would be hard for Ezio to release his spring-blade dagger, still less fight, while supporting Lorenzo on his right side. But he had his metal bracer strapped to his left forearm.

They made their way into the square outside the north wall of the cathedral and were greeted with scenes of confusion and chaos. They made their way west along the side of the cathedral, after Ezio had paused to wrap his cape over Lorenzo’s shoulders in a makeshift attempt to disguise him. In the piazza between the cathedral and the Baptistry, groups of men wearing the liveries of the Pazzi and the Medici were engaged in hand-to-hand combat, so engrossed that Ezio was able to slink past them, but as they reached the street that led up to

the Piazza San Lorenzo they were confronted by two men wearing the dolphin-and-crosses insignia. Both carried ugly-looking falchions.

'Halt!' one of the guards said. 'Where d'you think you're going?'

'I must get this man to safety,' said Ezio.

'And who might you be?' said the second guard, unpleasantly. He came forward and peered at Lorenzo's face. Lorenzo, half-fainting, turned away, but as he did so the cape slipped, revealing the Medici crest on his doublet.

'Oho,' said the second guard, turning to his friend. 'Looks like we might have caught a very big fish here, Terzago!'

Ezio's brain raced. He couldn't let go of Lorenzo, who was still losing blood. But if he didn't, he couldn't use his weapon. He raised his left foot quickly and gave the guard a shove in the arse. He fell, sprawling. In seconds, his mate came for them, falchion raised. As the blade came down, Ezio parried, and, using his wrist-guard, deflected the blow. As he did so, he swung his left arm, forcing the sword away, cutting at the man with the double-bladed dagger attached to the wrist-guard, though he could not get enough purchase to kill the man with it. And now the second guard was on his feet again, coming to the aid of his comrade, who in turn had staggered back, surprised that he had not cut Ezio's forearm off.

Ezio stopped the second blade in the same way, but this time he managed to run the wrist-guard down the cutting edge of the sword until it hit the hilt, bringing his hand in range of the man's wrist. He seized and twisted it so rapidly and hard that the man let go of his weapon with a sharp cry of pain. Stooping quickly, Ezio grabbed the falchion almost before it had hit the ground. It was hard, working with his left hand and encumbered by Lorenzo's weight, but he slashed it round and cut halfway through the guard's neck before he could recover. The second guard was coming at him again now, bellowing with anger. Ezio parried with his falchion and he and the guard cut and thrust at each other several times. But the guard, unaware still of the concealed metal bracer on Ezio's left arm, aimed blow after useless blow at it. Ezio's arm ached and he could barely keep on his feet, but at last he saw an opportunity. The man's helmet had worked loose, but the man was unaware of this and was looking down at Ezio's forearm, preparing to aim another blow at it. Swiftly, Ezio flicked his own blade up, feinting as though he had missed, but actually he succeeded in knocking the helmet off the man's head. Then, before he could react, Ezio slammed the heavy falchion down on the man's skull and split it in two. The falchion stuck there and Ezio was unable to work it loose. The man stood stock still for a moment, his eyes still wide with surprise, before crumpling to the dust. Looking quickly around, Ezio hauled Lorenzo up the street.

‘Not much farther, *Altezza*.’

They reached the church without further annoyance, but the doors were firmly shut against them. Ezio, looking back, saw at the end of the street that the bodies of the guards he’d killed had been discovered by a group of their comrades, who were now looking in their direction. He hammered on the doors, and a spyhole opened in it, revealing an eye and part of a suspicious face.

‘Lorenzo’s been wounded,’ Ezio gasped. ‘They’re coming for us! Open the door!’

‘I need the password,’ said the man within; Ezio was at a loss, but Lorenzo had heard the sound of the man’s voice and, recognizing it, he rallied.

‘Angelo!’ he said loudly. ‘It’s Lorenzo! Open the fucking door!’

‘By the Thrice Greatest,’ said the man within. ‘We thought you must be dead!’ He turned and yelled at someone unseen. ‘Get this thing unbolted! And fast!’

The spyhole closed and there was a sound of bolts quickly being drawn. Meanwhile, the Pazzi guardsmen, making their way up the street, had broken into a run. Just in time, one of the heavy doors swung open to admit Ezio and Lorenzo, and as quickly slammed shut behind them, the bolts shot back into place by the keepers in charge of them. There was a terrible noise of battle outside. Ezio found himself looking into the calm green eyes of a refined man of perhaps twenty-four.

‘Angelo Poliziano,’ the man introduced himself. ‘I sent some of our men round the back way to intercept those Pazzi rats. They shouldn’t give us any more trouble.’

‘Ezio Auditore.’

‘Ah – Lorenzo has spoken of you.’ He interrupted himself. ‘But we can talk later. Let me help you get him to a bench. We can take a look at his wounds there.’

‘He’s safe now,’ said Ezio, handing Lorenzo over to two attendants who gently guided him to a bench set against the north wall of the church.

‘We’ll patch him up, staunch the blood, and as soon as he’s recovered enough, we’ll get him back to his palazzo. Don’t worry, Ezio, he is indeed safe now, and we will not forget what you have done.’

But Ezio was already thinking of Francesco de’ Pazzi. The man had had more than enough time to make good his escape. ‘I must take my leave,’ he said.

‘Wait!’ Lorenzo called. Nodding to Poliziano, Ezio went over to him, and knelt by his side.

‘I am in your debt, *signore*,’ Lorenzo said. ‘And I do not know why you helped me, or how you could have known what was afoot, when even my own spies could not.’ He paused, his eyes wrinkling in pain as one of the attendants

cleaned his shoulder wound. ‘Who are you?’ he continued when he had recovered a little.

‘He’s Ezio Auditore,’ said Poliziano, coming up and placing a hand on Ezio’s shoulder.

‘Ezio!’ Lorenzo gazed at him, deeply moved. ‘Your father was a great man and a good friend. He was one of my strongest allies. He understood honour, loyalty, and never put his own interests before those of Florence. But…’ he paused again and smiled faintly, ‘I was there when Alberti died. Was it you?’

‘Yes.’

‘You took a fitting and swift revenge. As you see, I have not been so successful. But now, through their overweening ambition, the Pazzi have at last cut their own throats. I pray that…’

One of the men from the Medici patrol that had been sent out to deal with Ezio’s Pazzi pursuers came hurrying up, his face streaked with blood and sweat.

‘What is it?’ asked Poliziano.

‘Bad news, sir. The Pazzi have rallied and they are storming the Palazzo Vecchio. We can’t hold them off much longer.’

Poliziano grew pale. ‘This is bad news indeed. If they gain control of it, they’ll kill all the supporters we have that they can lay their hands on, and if they seize power –’

‘If they seize power,’ Lorenzo said, ‘my survival will mean nothing. We will all be dead men.’ He tried to get up, but fell back, groaning in pain. ‘Angelo! You must take what troops we have here and –’

‘No! My place is with you. We must get you to the Palazzo Medici as soon as possible. From there we may be able to reorganize and hit back.’

‘I will go,’ said Ezio. ‘I have unfinished business with *Messer* Francesco as it is.’

Lorenzo looked at him. ‘You have done enough.’

‘Not until this job is finished, *Altezza*. And Angelo is right – he has a more important task to perform – getting you to the safety of your palazzo.’

‘*Signori,*’ the Medici messenger put in. ‘I have more news. I saw Francesco de’ Pazzi leading a troop to the rear of the Palazzo Vecchio. He’s seeking a way in on the Signoria’s blind side.’

Poliziano looked at Ezio. ‘Go. Arm yourself and take a detachment from here, and hurry. This man will go with you and be your guide. He will show you where it is safest to leave this church. From there, it will take you ten minutes to reach the Palazzo Vecchio.’

Ezio bowed, and turned to leave.

‘Florence will never forget what you are doing for her,’ said Lorenzo. ‘Go with God.’

Outside, the bells of most of the churches were ringing, adding to the cacophony of clashing steel, and of human cries and groans. The city was in turmoil, wagons set afire blazed in the streets, pockets of soldiery from both sides ran hither and yon, or faced each other in pitched mêlées. The dead were scattered everywhere, in the squares and along the roadways, but there was too much tumult for the crows to dare to fly in for the feast they regarded with their harsh black eyes from the rooftops.

The western doors of the Palazzo Vecchio stood open, and the noise of fighting came from the courtyard within. Ezio brought his little troop to a halt and accosted a Medici officer who was running towards the palazzo in charge of another squad.

‘Do you know what’s going on?’

‘The Pazzi broke in from the rear and opened the doors from within. But our men inside the palazzo are keeping them off. They haven’t got beyond the courtyard. With luck we’ll be able to hem them in!’

‘Is there news of Francesco de’ Pazzi?’

‘He and his men are holding the back entrance of the Palazzo. If we could gain control of that we’d have them trapped for sure.’

Ezio turned to his men. ‘Let’s go!’ he shouted.

They rushed across the square and down the narrow street which ran along the north wall of the palazzo, where a very different Ezio had climbed to his father’s cell window long ago, and, taking the first right from it, quickly encountered the Pazzi troop under Francesco guarding the rear entrance.

They were immediately on their guard, and when Francesco recognized Ezio he cried, ‘You again! Why aren’t you dead yet? You murdered my son!’

‘He tried to murder me!’

‘Kill him! Kill him now!’

The two sides engaged fiercely, hacking and cutting at each other in near-desperate fury, for the Pazzi knew full well how important it was to protect their line of retreat. Ezio, cold rage in his heart, muscled his way towards Francesco, who took a stand with his back to the palazzo door. The sword Ezio had taken from the Medici armoury was well balanced and its blade was of Toledo steel, but the weapon was unfamiliar to him and, as a consequence, his blows were a fraction less effective than he’d normally inflict. He had maimed rather than killed the men who had stood in his way. This Francesco had noticed.

‘You think yourself a master swordsman now, do you, boy? You can’t even make a clean kill. Let me give you a demonstration.’

They fell on each other then, sparks flying from their blades as they clashed; but Francesco had less room to manoeuvre than Ezio and, twenty years his senior, was beginning to tire, even though he had seen less action that day than his opponent.

'Guards!' he cried at last. 'To me!'

But his men had fallen back before the Medici onslaught. He and Ezio now faced each other alone. Francesco looked desperately around for a means of retreat himself, but there was none save through the palazzo itself. He threw open the door behind him and went up a stone staircase that ran up the inside wall. Ezio realized that as most of the Medici defenders would be concentrated at the front of the building where most of the fighting was, they probably didn't have enough men to cover the rear as well. Ezio raced up after him to the second floor.

The rooms here were deserted, since all the occupants of the palazzo, save for half a dozen frightened clerks who ran away as soon as they saw them, were down below, fighting to contain the Pazzi in the courtyard. Francesco and Ezio fought their way through the gilded, high-ceilinged staterooms until they reached a balcony high above the Piazza della Signoria. The noise of battle reached up to them from below, and Francesco called out hopelessly for aid, but there was no one to hear him, and his last retreat was cut off.

'Stand and fight,' said Ezio. 'It's just us now.'

'*Maledetto*!'

Ezio slashed at him, drawing blood from his left arm. 'Come on, Francesco, where's all the courage you showed when you had my father killed? When you stabbed Giuliano this morning?'

'Get the hell away from me, you spawn of the devil!' Francesco lunged, but he was tiring, and his aim went far too wide. He staggered forwards, his balance thrown, and Ezio stood deftly aside, raising his foot and bringing it firmly down on Francesco's sword blade, pulling the man down with it.

Before Francesco could recover, Ezio stamped on his hand, making him let go of the hilt, grabbed him by the shoulder and heaved him over on to his back. As he struggled to get up, Ezio kicked him brutally in the face. Francesco's eyes rolled as he struggled into unconsciousness. Ezio knelt down and proceeded to frisk the old man while he was half-awake, ripping off body-armour and his doublet, revealing the pale, wiry body beneath. But there were no documents, nothing of importance on him. Just a handful of florins in his purse.

Ezio flung aside his sword and released his spring-blade dagger. He knelt, put an arm under Francesco's neck and pulled him up so that their faces were almost touching.

Francesco's eyelids flickered open. His eyes expressed horror and fear. 'Spare me!' he managed to croak.

At that moment a great cry of victory rose from the courtyard below. Ezio listened to the voices, and caught enough to understand that the Pazzi had been routed. 'Spare you?' he said. 'I'd as soon spare a rabid wolf.'

'No!' shrieked Francesco. 'I beg you!'

'This is for my father,' said Ezio, stabbing him in the gizzard. 'And this is for Federico,' stabbing him again, 'And *this* for Petruccio; and *this* for Giuliano!'

Blood spurted and streamed from Francesco's wounds and Ezio was covered in it, but he would have gone on stabbing the dying man if Mario's words had not then come back to him: '*Do not become the man he was*.' He sank back on to his heels. Francesco's eyes still glittered, though their light was fading. He was muttering something. Ezio leaned low to listen.

'A priest… a priest… for pity's sake, fetch me a priest.'

Ezio was deeply shocked, now that the fury within him had abated, at the savagery with which he had killed. This was not in accordance with the Creed. 'There is no time,' he said. 'I will have a Mass said for your soul.'

Francesco's throat was rattling now. Then his limbs stiffened and shook as he reached his death throes, his head arching back, his mouth open wide as he fought the last impossible battle with the invincible foe whom we all have to face one day; and he sank down, an empty bag, a slight, shrunken, pallid thing.

'*Requiescat in pace*,' murmured Ezio.

Then a new roar arose from the square. Across from the south-west corner fifty or sixty men came running, led by a man Ezio recognized – Francesco's uncle, Jacopo! They bore the Pazzi banner aloft.

'*Libertà! Libertà! Popolo e libertà!*' they shouted as they came. At the same time the Medici forces streamed out of the palazzo to meet them, but they were tired and, as Ezio could see, outnumbered.

He turned back to the body. 'Well, Francesco,' he said. 'I think I have found one way in which you can repay your debt, even now.' Quickly, he reached under the corpse's shoulders, hoisted it up – it was surprisingly light – and carried it to the balcony. Here, finding a lanyard from which a banner hung, he used the length of rope to fasten around the old man's lifeless neck. He quickly attached the other end to a sturdy stone column, and, summoning up all his strength, raised it high, then tossed it over the parapet. The rope paid out, but suddenly jerked taut with a snap. Francesco's limp body hung, toes pointing listlessly at the ground far below.

Ezio hid himself behind the column, 'Jacopo!' he called in a voice of thunder. 'Jacopo de' Pazzi! Look! Your leader is dead! Your cause is finished!'

Below, he could see Jacopo look up, and falter. Behind him, his men, too, hesitated. The Medici troops had followed his gaze, and now, cheering, they were closing in. But the Pazzi had already broken ranks – and were fleeing.

In a matter of days, it was all over. The power of the Pazzi in Florence was broken. Their goods and property were seized, their coats-of-arms torn down and trampled. Despite Lorenzo's appeals for mercy, the Florentine mob hunted down and killed every Pazzi sympathizer they could find, though some of the principals had fled. Only one who was captured obtained clemency – Raffaele Riario, a nephew of the Pope, whom Lorenzo considered to be too credulous and ingenuous to have had any serious involvement, though many of the Duke's advisers thought that Lorenzo was showing more humanity than political astuteness in his decision.

Sixtus IV was furious, nevertheless, and placed Florence under an interdict, but he was powerless otherwise, and the Florentines shrugged him off.

As for Ezio, he was one of the first to be summoned to the Duke's presence. He found Lorenzo standing on a balcony overlooking the Arno, watching the water. His wounds were still bandaged but they were healing, and the pallor had left his cheeks. He stood proud and tall, and fully the man who had earned the soubriquet Florence had bestowed on him – *Il Magnifico*.

After they had greeted one another, Lorenzo gestured towards the river. 'Do you know, Ezio, when I was six years old, I fell into the Arno. I soon found myself drifting down and into darkness, certain that my life was at an end. Instead, I woke to the sound of my mother weeping. At her side stood a stranger, soaking wet and smiling. She explained to me that he had saved me. That stranger's name was Auditore. And so began a long and prosperous relationship between our two families.' He turned to look at Ezio solemnly. 'I am sorry that I could not save your kinsmen.'

Ezio found it hard to find words. The cold world of politics, where distinctions between right and wrong are too often blurred, was one he understood but rejected. 'I know you would have saved them if it had been within your power,' he said.

'Your family house, at least, is safe and under the city's protection. I have put your old housekeeper, Annetta, in charge of it, and it is staffed and guarded at my expense. Whatever happens, it will be waiting for you whenever you wish to return to it.'

'You are gracious, *Altezza*.' Ezio paused. He was thinking of Cristina. Might it not be too late to persuade her to break her engagement, marry him, and help

him bring the Auditore family back to life? But two short years had changed him beyond recognition, and he had another duty now – a duty to the Creed.

'We have won a great victory,' he said at last. 'But the war is not won. Many of our enemies have escaped.'

'But the safety of Florence is assured. Pope Sixtus wanted to persuade Naples to move against us, but I have persuaded Ferdinando not to do so; and neither will Bologna or Milan.'

Ezio could not tell the Duke of the greater battle he was engaged in, for he could not be sure if Lorenzo was privy to the secrets of the Assassins. 'For the sake of our greater security,' he said, 'I need your permission to go and seek out Jacopo de' Pazzi.'

A cloud crossed Lorenzo's face. 'That coward!' he said angrily. 'He fled before we could lay hands on him.'

'Do we have any idea where he might have gone?'

Lorenzo shook his head. 'No. They've hidden themselves well. My spies report that Baroncelli may be trying to make his way to Constantinople, but as for the others…'

Ezio said, 'Give me their names,' and there was something in the firmness of his voice that told Lorenzo that here was a man it might be fatal to cross.

'How could I ever forget the names of my brother's murderers? And if you seek and find them, I shall be forever in your debt. They are the priests Antonio Maffei and Stefano da Bagnone. Bernardo Baroncelli I have mentioned. And there is another, not directly involved in the killings, but a dangerous ally of our enemies. He is the Archbishop of Pisa, Francesco Salviati – another of the Riario family, the Pope's hunting dogs. I showed his cousin clemency. I try not to be a man like they are. I wonder sometimes how wise I am in that.'

'I have a list,' said Ezio. 'Their names will be added to it.' He prepared to take his leave.

'Where will you go now?' asked Lorenzo.

'Back to my uncle Mario in Monteriggioni. That will be my base.'

'Then go with God, friend Ezio. But before you do, I have something that may interest you…' Lorenzo opened a leather wallet at his belt and from it extracted a sheet of vellum. Almost before he'd unrolled it, Ezio knew what it was.

'I remember years ago talking to your father about ancient documents,' said Lorenzo quietly. 'It was a shared interest that we had. I know he'd translated some. Here, take this – I found it among Francesco de' Pazzi's papers, and as he no longer needs it, I thought you might like it – as it reminded me of your father. Perhaps you might like to add it to his… collection?'

'I am indeed grateful for this, *Altezza*.'

‘I thought you might be,’ said Lorenzo, in such a way as to make Ezio wonder how much he actually knew. ‘I hope you find it useful.’

Before he packed and made ready for his journey, Ezio hastened, with the fresh Codex page Lorenzo had given him, to visit his friend Leonardo da Vinci. Despite the events of the last week, the workshop was carrying on as if nothing had happened.

‘I am glad to see you safe and sound, Ezio,’ Leonardo greeted him.

‘I see that you came through the troubles unscathed too,’ replied Ezio.

‘I told you – they leave me alone. They must think me either too mad, or too bad, or too dangerous to touch! But do have some wine, and there are some cakes somewhere, if they haven’t gone stale – my housekeeper’s useless – and tell me what’s on your mind.’

‘I’m leaving Florence.’

‘So soon? But they tell me you’re the hero of the hour! Why not sit back and enjoy it?’

‘I have no time.’

‘Still got enemies to pursue?’

‘How do you know?’

Leonardo smiled. ‘Thank you for coming to say goodbye,’ he said.

‘Before I go,’ said Ezio, ‘I have another page of the Codex for you.’

‘That is indeed good news. May I see it?’

‘Of course.’

Leonardo perused the new document carefully. ‘I’m beginning to get the hang of this,’ he said. ‘I still can’t quite see what the general diagram in the background is, but the writing is becoming familiar. It looks like the description of another weapon.’ He rose, and brought a handful of old and fragile-looking books to the table. ‘Let’s see… I must say, whoever the inventor was who wrote all this, he must have been a very long way ahead of his time. The mechanics alone…’ He trailed off, lost in thought. ‘Aha! I see! Ezio, it’s a design for another blade – one that will fit into the mechanism you attach to your arm if you need to use this one in place of the first.’

‘What’s the difference?’

‘If I’m right, this one’s quite nasty – it’s hollow in the middle, see? And through the tube concealed in the blade, its user can inject poison into his victim. Death wherever you strike! This thing would make you practically invincible!’

‘Can you make it?’

‘On the same terms as before?’

‘Of course.’

‘Good! How long have I got?’

‘The end of the week? I have some preparations to make, and… there’s someone I want to try to see… to say goodbye. But I need to get going as soon as possible.’

‘It doesn’t give me long. But I still have the tools I needed for the first job, and my assistants have got their hand in, so I don’t see why not.’

Ezio used the intervening time to settle his affairs in Florence, pack his bags, and arrange a courier to take a letter to Monteriggioni. He found himself putting off his final, self-imposed task again and again, but he knew he’d have to do it. At last, on his second to last evening, he walked over to the Calfucci mansion. His feet were like lead.

But when he approached the place he found it dark and closed up. Knowing he was behaving like a madman, he clambered up to Cristina’s balcony, only to find her windows securely shuttered. The nasturtiums in pots on the balcony were withered and dead. As he climbed down again, wearily, he felt as if his heart had been covered in a shroud. He remained at the door in a dream, for he knew not how long, but someone must have been watching him, for finally a first-floor window opened and a woman put her head out.

‘They’ve gone, you know. Signor Calfucci saw the trouble coming and cleared the family out to Lucca – that’s where his daughter’s fiancé comes from.’

‘Lucca?’

‘Yes. The families have got quite close, I hear.’

‘When will they be back?’

‘No idea.’ The woman looked at him. ‘Don’t I know you from somewhere?’

‘I don’t think so,’ said Ezio.

He spent that night dreaming alternately of Cristina and of Francesco’s bloody end.

In the morning it was overcast, a sky to suit Ezio’s mood. He made his way to Leonardo’s workshop, glad that this was the day on which he would leave Florence. The new knife blade was ready, finished in dull grey steel, very hard, the edges sharp enough to sever a silk handkerchief if you just let it fall through the air on to them. The hole in the point was tiny.

‘The hilt contains the poison, and you release it simply by flexing your arm muscle against this inner button. Be careful, as it’s quite sensitive.’

‘What poison should I use?’

‘I’ve used a strong distillation of hemlock to get you started, but when you run out, ask any doctor.’

‘Poison? From a doctor?’

‘In high enough concentrations, that which cures can also kill.’
Ezio nodded sadly. ‘I am in your debt once more.’
‘Here is your Codex page. Must you leave so soon?’
‘Florence is safe – for now. But I still have work to do.’

10

‘Ezio!’ beamed Mario, his beard bristlier than ever, his face burned by the Tuscan sun. ‘Welcome back!’

‘Uncle.’

Mario’s face became more serious. ‘I can see from your face that you’ve been through much in the months since we last met. And when you are bathed and rested, you must tell me all.’ He paused. ‘We have heard all the news from Florence, and I – even I – found myself praying that by some miracle you would be spared. But not only were you spared, you turned the tide against the Pazzi! The Templars will hate you for that, Ezio.’

‘It is a hatred I reciprocate.’

‘Rest first – then tell me all.’

That evening the two men sat down together in Mario’s study. Mario listened intently as Ezio told him all he knew of the events that had passed in Florence. He returned Vieri’s Codex page to his uncle, and then passed over the one he had been given by Lorenzo, describing the design it contained for the poison-blade, and showing it to him. Mario was duly impressed, but fixed his attention on the new page.

‘My friend was not able to decipher more than the description of the weapon,’ said Ezio.

‘That is as well. Not all the pages contain such instructions, and only those that do should be of any interest to him,’ said Mario, an underlying note of caution in his voice. ‘In any case, only when the pages are reunited shall we be able to understand fully the meaning of the Codex. But this page, when we place it, together with Vieri’s, with the others, should bring us a step further.’

He rose, walked over to the bookcase that concealed the wall on which the Codex pages hung, swung it back, and studied where the new pages might go. One of them connected with those already in place. The other touched a corner of it. ‘It is interesting that Vieri and his father should have owned pages that were evidently close together,’ he said. ‘Now, let us see what…’ He broke off, concentrating. ‘Hmmn,’ he said at last, but his voice was troubled.

‘Does this bring us any further, Uncle?’

‘I’m not sure. We may be just as much in the dark as ever, but there is definitely some reference to a prophet – not from the Bible, but either a living prophet, or one who is to come…’

‘Who could it be?’

‘Let’s not go too fast.’ Mario brooded over the pages, his lips moving, speaking a language Ezio did not understand. ‘As far as I can make out, the text here roughly translates as “Only the Prophet may open it…” And here, there’s a reference to two “Pieces of Eden”, but what that means, I do not know. We must be patient, until we have more pages of the Codex.’

‘I know the Codex is important, Uncle, but I have what is for me a more pressing reason to be here than to unravel its mystery. I seek the renegade, Jacopo de’ Pazzi.’

‘He certainly travelled south after fleeing Florence.’ Mario hesitated before continuing. ‘I had not meant to talk of this with you tonight, Ezio, but the matter is as urgent to me as I see it is to you, and we have to start our preparations soon. My old friend Roberto has been driven out of San Gimignano and it has become once more a stronghold of the Templars. It is too close to Florence, and to us, to remain so. I believe that Jacopo may seek refuge there.’

‘I have a list of the names of the other conspirators,’ said Ezio, taking it from his wallet and handing it to his uncle.

‘Good. Some of these men will have far less to fall back on than Jacopo, and may be easy to root out. I’ll send spies out into the countryside at dawn to see what they can discover about them, and in the meantime we must prepare to retake San Gimignano.’

‘By all means make your men ready, but for me there is no time to waste if I am to bring these murderers down.’

Mario considered. ‘Perhaps you are right – a man alone can often breach walls which an army cannot. And we should bring them down while they still think they are safe.’ He considered for a moment. ‘So, I give you my permission. You go on ahead and see what you can discover. I know you are more than able to look after yourself these days.’

‘Uncle, my thanks!’

‘Not so fast, Ezio! I grant you this leave on one condition.’

‘Which is?’

‘That you delay your departure for a week.’

‘A *week*?’

‘If you are to go out into the field alone, with no back-up, you will need more than these Codex weapons to help you. You are a man now, and a brave fighter for the Assassins. But your reputation will make the Templars even hungrier for your blood, and I know that there are still skills which you lack.’

Ezio shook his head impatiently. ‘No, Uncle, I am sorry, but a *week* – !’

Mario frowned, but raised his voice only slightly. It was enough. ‘I have heard good things of you, Ezio, but also bad. You lost control when you killed Francesco. And you allowed sentiment over Cristina to tempt you from your path. Your whole duty now is to the Creed, for if you neglect it, there may be no world left for you to enjoy.’ He drew himself up. ‘I speak with your father’s voice when I command your obedience.’

Ezio had watched his uncle grow in stature, even in size, as he spoke. And painful as it was to accept, he acknowledged the truth of what he had been told. Bitterly, he bowed his head.

‘Good,’ said Mario, more kindly. ‘And you will thank me for this. Your new combat training begins in the morning. And remember, the preparation is all!’

A week later, armed and ready, Ezio rode out for San Gimignano. Mario had told him to make contact with one of the *condottieri* patrols he had posted within sight of the town to keep track of its comings and goings, and he joined one of their encampments for his first night away from Monteriggioni.

The sergeant in command, a tough, battle-scarred man of twenty-five, whose name was Gambalto, gave him a slab of bread with pecorino and a mug of heavy Vernaccia, and while he was eating and drinking told him the news.

‘I think it’s a shame Antonio Maffei ever left Volterra. He’s got a bee in his bonnet about Lorenzo and thinks the Duke crushed his home town, whereas all he did was bring it under the wing of Florence. Now Maffei’s gone mad. He’s set himself up at the top of the cathedral tower, surrounded himself with Pazzi archers, and spends each day spouting scripture and arrows in equal measure. God knows what his plan is – to convert the citizens to his cause with his sermons, or kill them off with his arrows. The ordinary people of San Gimignano hate him, but as long as he continues his reign of terror, the city is powerless against him.’

‘So he needs to be neutralized.’

‘Well, that would certainly weaken the Pazzi power-base in the city.’

‘How well defended are they?’

‘Plenty of men on the watchtowers and at the gates. But they change the guard at dawn. Then, a man like you might be able to get over the walls and into the city unseen.’

Ezio mused, wondering whether this was a distraction from his own mission to hunt down Jacopo. But he reflected that he must be able to see the bigger picture – this Maffei was a Pazzi supporter and it was Ezio’s wider duty as an Assassin to unseat this madman.

By sunrise the following day, any especially attentive citizen of San Gimignano might have noticed a slim, grey-eyed, hooded figure gliding like a ghost through the streets which led to the cathedral square. The market traders were already setting up their stalls, but it was the ebb of the day’s cycle and the guards, bored and dispirited, leant on their halberds and dozed. The western side of the campanile was still in deep shadow, and no one saw the black-clad figure climb up it with all the quiet ease and grace of a spider.

The priest, gaunt, hollow-eyed and wild-haired, was already in position. Four tired Pazzi crossbowmen had also taken up their places, one at each corner of the tower. But, as if he did not trust the crossbowmen alone to protect him, Antonio Maffei, though clutching a Bible in his left hand, held a rondel-dagger in his right. He was already orating, and as Ezio drew close to the top of the tower, he began to catch Maffei’s words.

‘Citizens of San Gimignano, heed well my words! You must repent. REPENT! And seek forgiveness… Join me in prayer, my children, so that together we may stand against the darkness which has fallen across our beloved Tuscany! Give ear, oh Heavens, and I shall speak; and hear, oh Earth, the words of my mouth. Let my teaching drop as the rain, my speech distil as the dew, as raindrops on the tender herbs, as showers on the grass; for I proclaim the Name of the Lord! He is the Rock! His Work is perfect, for all His ways are just! Righteous and upright is He; but they who have corrupted themselves, they are not his children – a blemished, perverse and crooked generation! Citizens of San Gimignano – do you thus deal with the Lord? Oh, foolish and unwise people! Is he not your Father, who bore you? By the light of His mercy, be cleansed!’

Ezio leapt lightly over the parapet of the tower and took up a position near the trapdoor which opened on to the stairway that led below. The bowmen struggled to bring their crossbows to bear on him, but the range was short, and he had the element of surprise. He crouched and grasped the heels of one, toppling him over the parapet, howling to his death on the cobblestones two hundred feet below. Before the others could react, he had rounded on a second, stabbing him in the arm. The man looked astonished at the small wound, but then turned grey

and collapsed, the life draining from him in an instant. Ezio had strapped his new poison-blade to his arm, for there was no time for fair mortal combat now. He whirled on the third, who had dropped his crossbow and was trying to get past him to the stairs. As he reached them, Ezio kicked him in the rump and he stumbled down the wooden steps, head first, bones snapping as he crashed down the first flight. The last raised his hands and burbled something. Ezio looked down and saw that the man had pissed in his hose. He stepped aside and with an ironic bow allowed the terrified bowman to scamper down the stairs after the broken ruins of his comrade.

Then he was hit hard on the back of the neck by the heavy steel pommel of a dagger. Maffei had recovered from his shock at the attack and closed on Ezio from behind. Ezio staggered forward.

‘I will put you on your knees, sinner!’ screamed the priest, foam appearing at the sides of his mouth. ‘Beg forgiveness!’

Why do people always waste their time in talk, thought Ezio, who had had time to recover and turn while the priest was speaking.

The two men circled each other in the narrow space. Maffei slashed and lunged with his heavy dagger. He was clearly an unskilled fighter, but desperation and his fanaticism made him very dangerous indeed, and Ezio had to dance out of the way of the erratically swinging blade more than once, unable to land a blow himself. But at last he was able to catch the priest’s wrist and pull him forwards, so that their chests were touching.

‘I will send you whimpering to hell,’ snarled Maffei.

‘Show some respect for death, my friend,’ Ezio retorted.

‘I’ll give you respect!’

‘Give in! I’ll give you time to pray.’

Maffei spat in Ezio’s eyes, forcing him to let go. Then, screaming, he plunged his dagger at Ezio’s left forearm, only to see the blade slide harmlessly to one side, deflected by the metal bracer in place there. ‘What demon protects you?’ he snapped.

‘You talk too much,’ Ezio said, pushing his own dagger a little way into the priest’s neck, and tensing the muscles in his forearm. As the poison flowed through the blade into Maffei’s jugular, the priest stiffened, opened his mouth, but nothing but foul breath came forth. Then he pushed himself away from Ezio, staggered back to the parapet, steadied himself an instant, and then fell forward into the arms of death.

Ezio stooped over Maffei’s corpse. From his robes he extracted a letter, which he opened and quickly scanned.

Padrone:
It is with fear in my heart that I write this. The Prophet has arrived. I feel it. The very birds don't act as they should. They swirl aimlessly round the sky. I see them from my tower. I will not attend our meeting as you required, for I can no longer remain thus exposed in public view, for fear that the Demon may find me. Forgive me, but I must heed my inner voice. May the Father of Understanding guide you. And guide me.
Brother A.

Gambalto was right, thought Ezio, the man had lost his mind. Sombrely, remembering his uncle's admonition, he closed the priest's eyes, saying as he did so, '*Requiescat in pace*.'

Aware that the archer to whom he'd shown mercy might have raised the alarm, he looked down over the tower's parapet at the town below, but could see no activity to worry him. The Pazzi guards still lounged at their posts, and the market had opened, doing a thin trade. No doubt the crossbowman was by now halfway across the countryside, making his way home, finding desertion preferable to a court-martial and possibly torture. He pushed his blade back into its mechanism, hidden on his forearm, taking care to touch it only with a gloved hand, and picked his way down the stairs of the tower. The sun was up, and it would make him too easily visible if he were to climb down the outside of the campanile.

When he rejoined Mario's troop of mercenaries, Gambalto greeted him in an excited mood. 'Your presence brings us good fortune,' he said. 'Our scouts have tracked down Archbishop Salviati!'

'Where?'

'Not far from here. Do you see that mansion, on the hill, over there?'

'Yes.'

'He's there.' Gambalto remembered himself. 'But first, I must ask you, *Capitano*, how you fared in the city?'

'There will be no more sermons of hatred from that tower.'

'The people will bless you, *Capitano*.'

'I am no captain.'

'To us you are,' said Gambalto, simply. 'Take a detachment of men from here. Salviati is heavily guarded and the mansion is an old, fortified building.'

'Very well,' said Ezio. 'It is good that the eggs are close together, almost in one nest.'

'The others cannot be far away, Ezio. We will endeavour to find them during your absence.'

Ezio selected a dozen of Gambalto's best hand-to-hand combat fighters, and led them on foot across the fields that separated them from the mansion where Salviati had taken refuge. He had his men fanned out, but within calling distance

of one another, and the Pazzi outposts Salviati had put into position were easily either avoided or neutralized. But Ezio lost two of his own men in the approach.

Ezio had hoped to take the mansion by surprise, before its occupants were aware of his attack, but when he came close to the solid main gates a figure appeared on the walls above them, dressed in the robes of an archbishop, gripping the battlements with claw-like hands. A vulturine face peered down, and was quickly withdrawn.

'It's Salviati,' Ezio said to himself.

There were no other guards posted outside the gates. Ezio beckoned to his men to come up close to the walls, so that archers would not have enough of an angle to fire down at them. There was no doubt that Salviati would have concentrated what remained of his bodyguard inside the walls, which were high and thick enough to seem unbreachable. Ezio was wondering whether he should once again attempt climbing up and over the walls, and open the gates from the inside to admit his troops, but he knew that the Pazzi guards inside would be alerted to his presence.

Motioning to his men to stay out of sight, huddled against the walls, he crouched low and made his way back through the tall grass the short distance to where the body of one of their enemies lay. Quickly he stripped and donned the man's uniform, bundling his own clothes under his arm.

He rejoined his men, who at first bristled at the sight of a supposed Pazzi approaching, and handed his clothes over to one of them. Then he banged on the gates with the pommel of his sword.

'Open!' he cried. 'In the name of the Father of Understanding!'

A tense minute passed. Ezio stood back so that he could be seen from the walls. And then he heard the sound of heavy bolts being drawn.

As soon as the gates began to open, Ezio and his men stormed them, heaving them back and scattering the guards within. They found themselves in a courtyard, around which the mansion formed itself in three wings. Salviati himself stood at the top of a flight of stairs in the middle of the main wing. A dozen burly men, fully armed, stood between him and Ezio. More occupied the courtyard.

'Filthy treachery!' cried the archbishop. 'But you will not get out again as easily as you have got in.' He raised his voice to a commanding roar: 'Kill them! Kill them all!'

The Pazzi troops closed in, all but surrounding Ezio's men. But the Pazzi had not trained under such a man as Mario Auditore, and despite the odds against them, Ezio's *condottieri* engaged successfully with their opponents in the courtyard, while Ezio sprang towards the stairs. He released his poison-blade

and slashed at the men surrounding Salviati. It didn't matter where he hit; every time he struck and drew blood, be it only at a man's cheek, that man died in a heartbeat.

'You are indeed a demon – from the Fourth Ring of the Ninth Circle!' Salviati spoke in a shuddering voice as at last he and Ezio confronted one another alone.

Ezio retracted the poison-blade, but drew his battle-dagger. He grasped Salviati by the scruff of his cope and held the blade to the archbishop's neck. 'The Templars lost their Christianity when they discovered banking,' he said, evenly. 'Do you not know your own gospel? "Thou canst not serve God and Mammon!" But now is your chance to redeem yourself. Tell me – where is Jacopo?'

Salviati glared in defiance. 'You will never find him!'

Ezio drew the blade gently but firmly across the man's gizzard, drawing a little blood. 'You'll have to do better than that, *Arcivescovo*.'

'Night guards us when we meet – now, finish your business!'

'So, you skulk like the murderers you are under cover of darkness. Thank you for that. I will ask you once more. *Where*?'

'The Father of Understanding knows that what I do now is for the greater good,' said Salviati coldly, and, suddenly seizing Ezio's wrist with both his hands, he forced the dagger deep into his own throat.

'Tell me!' yelled Ezio. But the archbishop, his mouth bubbling blood, had already sunk at his feet, his gorgeous yellow-and-white robes blossoming red.

It was to be several months before Ezio had further news of the conspirators he sought. Meanwhile, he worked with Mario to plan how they might retake San Gimignano and free its citizens from the cruel yoke of the Templars, but they had learned a lesson from the last time, and maintained an iron grip on the city. Knowing that the Templars would also be searching for the still-missing pages of the Codex, Ezio roamed far and wide in quest of them himself, but to no avail. The pages already in the possession of the Assassins remained concealed, under Mario's strict guard, for without them, the secret of the Creed would never yield to the Templars.

Then, one day, a courier from Florence rode up to Monteriggioni bearing a letter from Leonardo for Ezio. Quickly, he reached for a mirror, for he knew his friend's habit, being left-handed, of writing backwards – though the spidery scrawl would have been difficult for the most talented reader, unfamiliar with it, to decipher in any circumstances. Ezio broke the seal and read eagerly, his heart lifting at every line:

Gentile *Ezio*,

Duke Lorenzo has asked me to send you news – of Bernardo Baroncelli! It seems that the man managed to take ship for Venice, and from thence secretly made his way, incognito, to the court of the Ottoman sultan at Constantinople, planning to seek refuge there. But he spent no time in Venice, and did not learn that the Venetians had recently signed a peace with the Turks – they have even sent their second-best painter, Gentile Bellini, to make a portrait of Sultan Mehmet. So that when he arrived, and his true identity became known, he was arrested.

Of course then you can imagine the letters that flew between the Sublime Porte and Venice; but the Venetians are our allies too – at least for now – and Duke Lorenzo is nothing if not a master diplomat. Baroncelli was sent in chains back to Florence, and once here, he was put to the question. But he was stubborn, or foolish, or brave, I know not which – he withstood the rack and the white-hot tongs and the floggings and the rats nibbling his feet, only telling us that the conspirators used to meet by night in an old crypt under Santa Maria Novella. Of course a search was made but yielded nothing. So he was hanged. I have done rather a good sketch of him hanging, which I will show you when we next meet. I think it is, anatomically speaking, quite accurate.

Distinti saluti

Your friend
Leonardo da Vinci

'It is good that the man is dead,' commented Mario when Ezio showed him the letter. 'He was the type who would steal straw from his mother's kennel. But alas, it brings us no nearer to discovering what the Templars plan next, or even the whereabouts of Jacopo.'

Ezio had found time to visit his mother and his sister, who continued to while away their days in the serenity of the convent, watched over by the kindly abbess. Maria had, he saw to his sadness, made as much of a recovery as she would ever make. Her hair had turned prematurely grey, and there were fine crowsfeet lines at the corners of her eyes, but she had achieved an inner calm, and when she spoke of her dead husband and sons it was with affectionate and proud remembrance. But the sight of little Petruccio's pearwood box of eagle's plumes, which she kept on her bedside table, could still bring tears to her eyes. As for Claudia, she was now a *novizia*, but although Ezio regretted what he saw as a waste of her beauty and her spirit, he acknowledged that there was a light in her face which caused him to bow to her decision, and be happy for her. He visited them again over Christmas, and in the New Year took up his training again, though inside himself he was boiling over with impatience. To counter this, Mario had made him joint commander of his castle, and Ezio tirelessly sent out his own spies and scouts to range the country in quest of the quarry he implacably sought.

And then, at last, there was news. One morning in late spring Gambalto appeared in the doorway of the map-room where Ezio and Mario were deep in conference, his eyes ablaze.

‘*Signori*! We have found Stefano da Bagnone! He has taken refuge in the Abbey Asmodeo, only a few leagues to the south. He has been right under our noses all this time!’

‘They hang together like the dogs they are,’ snapped Mario, his stubby workman’s fingers quickly tracing a route on the map before him. He looked at Ezio. ‘But he is a lead-dog. Jacopo’s secretary! If we cannot beat something out of him – !’

But Ezio was already giving orders for his horse to be saddled and made ready. Swiftly, he made his way to his quarters and armed himself, strapping on the Codex weapons and choosing, this time, the original spring-blade over the poison one. He had replaced Leonardo’s original hemlock distillation with henbane, on the advice of Monteriggioni’s doctor, and the poison sac in its hilt was full. He had decided he would use the poison-blade with discretion, since there was always the risk of delivering himself a fatal dose. For this reason, and because his fingers were covered with small scars, he now wore supple but heavy leather gloves when using either blade.

The abbey was located near Monticiano, whose ancient castle brooded over the little hill town. It was set in the sunlit hollow of a gentle slope, packed with cypress trees. It was a new building, perhaps only one hundred years old, built of expensive imported yellow sandstone and built round a vast courtyard with a church at its centre. The gates stood wide open, and the monks of the abbey’s Order, in their ochre habits, could be seen working in the fields and orchards which had been cleared around the building, and in the vineyard above it; the wine of the monastery attached to the abbey was famous, and was exported even to Paris. Part of Ezio’s preparation had been to provide himself with a monk’s habit of his own, and, having left his horse with an ostler at the inn where he had taken a room under the guise of a state courier, he donned his disguise before arriving at the abbey.

Soon after his arrival he spotted Stefano, deep in conversation with the abbey’s *hospitarius*, a corpulent monk who looked as if he had taken on the shape of one of the wine barrels he so evidently frequently emptied. Ezio managed to manoeuvre himself close enough to listen without being noticed.

‘Let us pray, brother,’ said the monk.

‘Pray?’ said Stefano, whose black garb contrasted with all the sunny colours around him. He looked like a spider on a pancake. ‘For what?’ he added sardonically.

The monk looked surprised. ‘For the Lord’s protection!’

‘If you think the Lord has any interest in our affairs, Brother Girolamo, you have another think coming! But please, by all means, continue to delude

yourself, if it helps you to pass the time.'

Brother Girolamo was shocked. 'What you speak is blasphemy!'

'No. I speak truth.'

'But, to deny His most exalted Presence – !'

'– is the only rational response, when faced with the declaration that there exists some invisible madman in the sky. And believe me, if our precious Bible is anything to go by, He's completely lost His mind.'

'How can you say such things? You are yourself a priest!'

'I am an administrator. I use these clerical robes to bring me closer to the accursed Medici, so that I may chop them off at the knees, in the service of my true Master. But first, there is still the business of this Assassin, Ezio. For too long he has been a thorn in our side, and we must pluck him out.'

'There you speak truth. That unholy demon!'

'Well,' said Stefano with a crooked smile. 'At least we agree on something.'

Girolamo lowered his voice. 'They say the Devil has given him unnatural speed and strength.'

Stefano looked at him. 'The Devil? No, my friend. These are gifts he gave himself, through rigorous training over years.' He paused, his scrawny body bent at a pensive angle. 'You know, Girolamo, I find it disturbing that you are so unwilling to credit people for their own circumstances. I think you'd make victims out of the entire world if you could.'

'I forgive your lack of faith and your forked tongue,' replied Girolamo piously. 'You are still one of God's children.'

'I told you –' Stefano began with some asperity; but then spread his hands and gave it up. 'Oh, what's the use? Enough of this! It's like speaking to the wind!'

'I will pray for you.'

'As you wish. But do so quietly. I must keep watch. Until we have this Assassin dead and buried, no Templar can drop his guard for an instant.'

The monk withdrew with a bow, and Stefano was left alone in the courtyard. The bell for First and Second Qauma had sounded, and all the Community were in the abbey church. Ezio emerged from the shadows like a wraith. The sun shone with the silent heaviness of midday. Stefano, crow-like, stalked up and down by the north wall, restless, impatient, possessed.

When he saw Ezio, he showed no surprise at all.

'I am unarmed,' he said. 'I fight with the mind.'

'To use that, you must remain alive. Can you defend yourself?'

'Would you kill me in cold blood?'

'I will kill you because it is necessary that you die.'

‘A good answer! But do you not think I may have secrets that would be useful to you?’

‘I can see that you would not bow under any torture.’

Stefano looked at him appraisingly. ‘I will take that as a compliment, though I am not so sure myself. However, it is of merely academic significance.’ He paused, before continuing in his thin voice. ‘You have missed your chance, Ezio. The die is cast. The Assassins’ cause is lost. I know you will kill me whatever I do or say, and that I shall be dead before the midday Mass is over; but my death will profit you nothing. The Templars already have you in check, and soon it will be checkmate.’

‘You cannot be sure of that.’

‘I am about to meet my Maker – if He exists at all. It will be refreshing to find out. In the meantime, why should I lie?’

Ezio released his dagger.

‘How clever,’ commented Stefano. ‘What will they think of next?’

‘Redeem yourself,’ said Ezio. ‘Tell me what you know.’

‘What do you *wish* to know? The whereabouts of my Master, Jacopo?’ Stefano smiled. ‘That is easy. He meets our confederates soon, at night, in the shadow of the Roman gods.’ He paused. ‘I hope that makes you happy, for nothing you can do will make me say more. And it is in any case of no significance, for I know in my heart that you are too late. My only regret is that I will not see your own undoing – but who knows? Perhaps there *is* an Afterlife, and I shall be able to look down on your death. But for the present – let us get this unpleasant business over with.’

The abbey bell was ringing once more. Ezio had little time. ‘I think you could teach me much,’ he said.

Stefano looked at him sadly. ‘Not in this world,’ he said. He opened the neck of his gown. ‘But do me the favour of sending me quickly into the night.’

Ezio stabbed once, deeply, and with deadly accuracy.

‘There are the ruins of a Temple of Mithras to the south-west of San Gimignano,’ said Mario thoughtfully when Ezio returned. ‘They are the only Roman ruins of any significance for miles around, and you say he spoke of the shadow of the Roman *gods*?’

‘Those were his words.’

‘And the Templars are to meet there – soon?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then we must not delay. We must keep a vigil there from this night on.’

Ezio was despondent. ‘Da Bagnone told me it was already too late to stop them.’

Mario grinned. ‘Well then, it’s up to us to prove him wrong.’

It was the third night of the vigil. Mario had returned to his base to continue his schemes against the Templars in San Gimignano, and left Ezio with five trusted men, Gambalto among them, to keep watch concealed in the dense woods which fringed the isolated, desolate ruins of the Temple of Mithras. This was a large set of buildings developed over centuries, whose last occupant had indeed been Mithras, the god the Roman army had adopted, but which contained more ancient chapels, once consecrated to Minerva, Venus and Mercury. There was also a theatre attached to the complex, whose stage was still solid, though faced by a broken semicircle of terraced stone benches, the home now of scorpions and mice, backed by a crumbling wall and flanked by broken columns where owls had made their nests. Everywhere ivy climbed, and tough buddleia shouldered its way through the cracks it had made in the stained and decaying marble. Over all, the moon cast a ghastly light, and, used though they were to tackling mortal foes unafraid, one or two of the men were distinctly nervous.

Ezio had told himself that they would keep watch for a week, but he knew it would be hard for the men to keep their nerve in this place for that long, for the ghosts of the pagan past were a strong presence here. But towards midnight, as the Assassins ached in every limb from lack of activity and keeping still, they heard the faint tinkling of harness. Ezio and his men braced themselves. Soon afterwards there rode through the complex a dozen soldiers bearing torches and headed by three men. They were making for the theatre. Ezio and his *condottieri* shadowed them there.

The men dismounted and formed a protective circle round their three leaders. Watching, Ezio recognized with triumph the face of the man he had sought so long – Jacopo de’ Pazzi, a harassed-looking greybeard of sixty. He was accompanied by one man he did not know and another whom he did – the beak-nosed, crimson-cowled, unmistakable figure of Rodrigo Borgia! Grimly, Ezio attached the poison-blade to the mechanism on his right wrist.

‘You know why I have called this meeting,’ Rodrigo began. ‘I have given you more than enough time, Jacopo. But you have yet to redeem yourself.’

‘I am sorry, *Commendatore*. I have done all that is within my power. The Assassins have outflanked me.’

‘You have not regained Florence.’

Jacopo bowed his head.

‘You have not even been able to strike off the head of Ezio Auditore, a mere cub! And with every victory over us, he gains strength, becomes more dangerous!’

‘It was my nephew Francesco’s fault,’ babbled Jacopo. ‘His impatience made him reckless! I tried to be the voice of reason –’

‘More like the voice of cowardice,’ put in the third man, harshly.

Jacopo turned to him with markedly less respect than he had shown Rodrigo. ‘Ah, *Messer* Emilio. Perhaps we would have been better served had you sent us weaponry of quality, instead of the rubbish you Venetians call armaments! But you Barbarigi were always cheapskates.’

‘Enough!’ thundered Rodrigo. He turned again to Jacopo. ‘We put our faith in you and your family, and how have you repaid us? With inaction and incompetence. You retake San Gimignano! Bravo! And there you sit. You even allow them to attack you there. Brother Maffei was a valuable servant of our Cause. And you could not even save your own secretary, a man whose brain was worth ten of yours!’

‘*Altezza*! Just give me the chance to make amends, and you will see –’ Jacopo looked at the hardened faces surrounding him. ‘I will show you –’

Rodrigo allowed his features to soften. He even sketched a smile. ‘Jacopo. We know the best course to take now. You must leave it to us. Come here. Let me embrace you.’

Hesitantly, Jacopo obeyed. Rodrigo put his left arm round his shoulders, and with his right drew a stiletto from his robes and slid it firmly between Jacopo’s ribs. Jacopo pushed his way back off the knife, while Rodrigo looked at him in the same way as a father might regard his errant son. Jacopo clutched his wound. Rodrigo had not penetrated any vital organ. Perhaps –

But now Emilio Barbarigo stepped up to him. Instinctively, Jacopo held up his bloodied hands to protect himself, for Emilio had drawn a wicked-looking basilard, one of its edges roughly serrated, and with a deep blood-gutter along the side of its blade.

‘No,’ whimpered Jacopo. ‘I have done my best. I have always served the Cause loyally. All my life. Please… Please don’t…’

Emilio gave a brutal laugh. ‘Please don’t what, you snivelling piece of shit?’ And he tore Jacopo’s doublet open, immediately dragging the serrated blade of his heavy dagger across Jacopo’s chest, tearing it open.

Jacopo screamed and fell first to his knees and then on to his side, writhing in blood. He looked up to see Rodrigo Borgia standing over him, a narrow sword in his hand.

‘Master – have pity!’ Jacopo managed to say. ‘It is not too late! Give me one last chance to put matters right –’ Then he choked on his own blood.

‘Oh, Jacopo,’ said Rodrigo, gently. ‘How you have disappointed me.’

He raised his blade and thrust it through Jacopo’s neck with such force that the point emerged at the nape, seeming to sever the spinal cord. He twisted it in the wound before drawing it out slowly. Jacopo raised himself, his mouth full of blood, but he was already dead and sank back, twitching, until he was, at last, still.

Rodrigo wiped his sword on the dead man’s clothes, and, drawing his cloak aside, sheathed it. ‘What a mess,’ he murmured. Then he turned, looked directly in Ezio’s direction, grinned, and shouted, ‘You can come out now, Assassin! My apologies for having robbed you of your prize!’

Before he could react, Ezio found himself grabbed by two guards whose tunics bore a red cross within a yellow shield – the coat of arms of his arch-enemy. He called to Gambalto, but there was no answer from any of his men. He was dragged on to the stage of the ancient theatre.

‘Greetings, Ezio!’ said Rodrigo. ‘I am sorry about your men, but did you really think I didn’t expect to find you here? That I didn’t plan for you to come? Do you think Stefano da Bagnone all but told you the exact time and place of this meeting without my knowledge and approval? Of course, we had to make it seem difficult, or you might have sensed a trap.’ He laughed. ‘Poor Ezio! You see, we’ve been at this game a lot longer than you have. I had my guards hidden in the woods here long before you even arrived. And I’m afraid your men were taken as much by surprise as you were – but I wanted to see you again alive before you leave us. Call it a whim. And now I am satisfied.’ Rodrigo smiled and addressed the guards holding Ezio’s arms. ‘Thank you. You may kill him now.’

Together with Emilio Barbarigo, he mounted his horse and rode away, together with the guards who had accompanied him there. Ezio watched him go. He thought fast. There were the two burly men holding him – and how many others, still concealed in the woods? How many men had Borgia set in place to ambush his own troop?

‘Say your prayers, boy,’ one of his captors told him.

‘Look,’ said Ezio. ‘I know you’re only obeying orders. So, if you release me, I’ll spare your lives. How about that?’

The guard who had spoken looked amused. ‘Well! Listen to you! I don’t think I’ve ever come across anyone able to keep their sense of humour like you at a moment like –’

But he didn’t get to finish his sentence. Ezio sprang out his hidden blade and, taking advantage of their surprise, cut at the man holding him on his right. The

poison did its work and the man staggered back, falling not far away. Before the other guard could react, Ezio had thrust his blade deep into his armpit, the one spot armour could not cover. Free, he leapt into the shadows at the edge of the stage and waited. He didn't have to wait long. From out of the woods the other ten guards Rodrigo had hidden there emerged, some warily scanning the fringes of the theatre, others bending over their fallen comrades. Moving with the deadly speed of a lynx, Ezio threw himself among them, slashing at them with sickle-like cuts, concentrating on any part of their bodies that was exposed. Already frightened and taken half off-guard, the Borgia troops reeled before him, and Ezio had slain five of their number before the others took to their heels and vanished, bellowing in panic, into the woods. Ezio watched them go. They wouldn't report back to Rodrigo unless they wanted to be hanged for incompetence, and it would take a while before they were missed, and Rodrigo learned that his satanic plan had misfired.

Ezio knelt over the body of Jacopo de' Pazzi. Battered and robbed of all dignity, all that was left was the shell of a pathetic, desperate old man.

'You poor wretch,' he said. 'I was angry when I saw that Rodrigo had robbed me of my rightful prey, but now, now –'

He fell silent and reached over to close de' Pazzi's eyes. Then he realized that the eyes were looking at him. By some miracle, Jacopo was still – just – alive. He opened his mouth to speak but no sound could come. It was clear that he was in the last extremes of agony. Ezio's first thought was to leave him to a lingering death, but the eyes pleaded with him. Show mercy, he remembered, even when you yourself have been shown none. That too was part of the Creed.

'God give you peace,' he said, kissing Jacopo's forehead as he pushed his dagger firmly into his old adversary's heart.

11

When Ezio returned to Florence and broke the news to Duke Lorenzo of the death of the last of the Pazzi, Lorenzo was delighted, but saddened that the security of Florence and of the Medici had had to be bought at the cost of so much blood. Lorenzo preferred to find diplomatic solutions to differences, but that desire made him an exception among his peers, the rulers of the other city-states of Italy.

He rewarded Ezio with a ceremonial cape, which conferred on him the Freedom of the City of Florence.

'This is a most gracious gift, *Altezza*,' Ezio told him. 'But I fear I will have little leisure to enjoy the benefits it confers on me.'

Lorenzo was surprised. 'What? Do you intend to leave again soon? I had hoped that you would stay, reopen your family palazzo, and take up a position in the city's administration, working with me.'

Ezio bowed, but said, 'I am sorry to say that it is my belief that our troubles have not come to an end with the fall of the Pazzi. They were but one tentacle of a greater beast. My intention now is to go to Venice.'

'Venice?'

'Yes. The man who was with Rodrigo Borgia at the meeting with Francesco is a member of the Barbarigo family.'

'One of the most powerful families in La Serenissima. Are you saying this man is dangerous?'

'He is allied to Rodrigo.'

Lorenzo considered for a moment, then spread his hands. 'I let you go with the utmost regret, Ezio; but I know that I shall never be out of your debt, which means in turn that I have no power to command you. Besides, I have a feeling

that the work you are engaged on will in the long run be of benefit to our city, even though I may not live to see it.'

'Don't say that, *Altezza*.'

Lorenzo smiled. 'I hope I am wrong, but living in this country at this time is like living on the rim of Vesuvius – dangerous and uncertain!'

Before leaving, Ezio brought news and gifts to Annetta, though it was painful to him to visit his former family home, and he would not enter it. He also studiously avoided the Calfucci mansion, but he did call on Paola, and found her gracious, but distracted, as if her mind were somewhere else. His last port of call was at his friend Leonardo's workshop, but when he got there he found only Agniolo and Innocento about, and the place had the look of being closed up. There was no sign of Leonardo.

Agniolo smiled and greeted him as he arrived. '*Ciao*, Ezio! It's been a long time!'

'Too long!'

Ezio looked about him, questioningly.

'You're wondering where Leonardo is.'

'Has he left?'

'Yes, but not for ever. He's taken some of his material with him, but he couldn't take it all, so Innocento and I are looking after it while he's away.'

'And where has he gone?'

'It's funny. The Maestro was in negotiations with the Sforza in Milan, but then the Conte de Pexaro invited him to spend some time in Venice – he's to complete a set of five family portraits…' Agniolo smiled knowingly. 'As if *that'll* ever happen; but it seems that the Council of Venice is interested in his engineering work, and they're providing him with a workshop, staff, the lot. So, dear Ezio, if you need him, that is where you'll need to go.'

'But that is exactly where I'm going,' cried Ezio. 'This is splendid news. When did he leave?'

'Two days ago. But you'll have no difficulty catching up with him. He's got a huge wagon absolutely loaded with his stuff, and a couple of oxen to draw it.'

'Any of his people with him?'

'Just the wagoners, and a couple of outriders, in case of trouble. They've taken the Ravenna road.'

Ezio took with him only what he could pack into his saddlebags, and, travelling alone, had been riding only a day and a half when, at a bend in the road, he came upon a heavy ox-drawn cart equipped with a canvas canopy beneath which any amount of machinery and models was carefully stowed.

The wagoners stood at the side of the road, scratching their heads and looking hot and bothered, while the outriders, two slightly built boys armed with crossbows and lances, kept watch from a nearby knoll. Leonardo was nearby, apparently setting up some kind of leverage system, when he looked up and saw Ezio.

‘Hello, Ezio! What luck!’

‘Leonardo! What’s going on?’

‘I seem to have run into a bit of trouble. One of the cartwheels…’ He pointed to where one of the rear wheels had worked its way off the axle. ‘The problem is that we need the wagon lifted clear so that we can refit the wheel but we just don’t have the manpower to do it, and this lever I’ve botched together isn’t going to lift it high enough. So do you think…?’

‘Of course.’

Ezio beckoned to the two wagoners, heavily built men who’d be more use to him than the lissom outriders, and between the three of them they were able to hoist the wagon up high enough and hold it there long enough for Leonardo to slip the wheel back on to the axle and peg it securely. While he was doing this, Ezio, straining with the others to keep the wagon up, looked in at its contents. Among them, unmistakably, was the bat-like structure he’d seen before. It looked as if it had undergone many modifications.

Once the wagon had been repaired, Leonardo took up his seat on its front bench with one of the wagoners, while the other walked at the head of the oxen. The outriders patrolled restlessly both ahead and to the rear. Ezio kept his horse at a walk, next to Leonardo, and they talked. It had been a very long time since their last meeting, and they had much to talk about. Ezio was able to bring Leonardo up to date, and Leonardo talked of his new commissions, and of his excitement at the prospect of seeing Venice.

‘I am so delighted to have you as a travelling companion! Mind you, you’d get there much faster if you didn’t travel at my pace.’

‘It’s a pleasure. And I want to make sure you get there safely.’

‘I have my outriders.’

‘Leonardo, don’t misunderstand me, but even highwaymen still wet behind the ears could flick those two away as easily as you’d flick away a gnat.’

Leonardo looked surprised, then offended, then amused. ‘Then I’m doubly glad of your company.’ He looked sly. ‘And I have an idea it’s not just for sentimental reasons that you’d like to see me get there in one piece.’

Ezio smiled, but did not reply. Instead he said, ‘I notice you’re still working on that bat-contraption.’

‘Eh?’

‘You know what I mean.’

‘Oh, that. It’s nothing. Just something I’ve been tinkering away at. But I couldn’t leave it behind.’

‘What is it?’

Leonardo was reluctant. ‘I don’t really like to talk about things before they’re ready…’

‘Leonardo! You can trust me, surely.’ Ezio lowered his voice. ‘After all, I’ve trusted you with secrets.’

Leonardo struggled with himself, then relaxed. ‘All right, but you must tell no one else.’

‘*Promesso*.’

‘Anyone would think you mad if you did tell them,’ Leonardo continued, but his voice was excited. ‘Listen. I think I have found a way to make a man fly!’

Ezio looked at him and laughed in total disbelief.

‘I can see a time coming when you might want to wipe that smile off your face,’ said Leonardo, good-naturedly.

He changed the subject then and started to talk about Venice, La Serenissima, aloof from the rest of Italy and often looking eastwards more than westwards, both for trade and in trepidation, for the Ottoman Turks held sway as far as halfway up the northern Adriatic coast these days. He talked of the beauty and the treachery of Venice, of the city’s dedication to moneymaking, of its *richesse*, its weird construction – a city of canals rising out of fenland and built on a foundation of hundreds of thousands of huge wooden stakes – its ferocious independence, and its political power: not three hundred years earlier, the Doge of Venice had diverted an entire Crusade from the Holy Land to serve his own purposes, to destroy all commercial and military competition and opposition to his city-state, and to bring the Byzantine Empire to its knees. He talked of the secret, ink-dark backwaters, the towering, candlelit *palazzi*, the curious dialect of Italian they spoke, the silence that hovered, the gaudy splendour of their dress, their magnificent painters, of whom the prince was Giovanni Bellini, whom Leonardo was eager to meet, of their music, their masked festivals, their flashy ability to show off, their mastery of the art of poisoning. ‘And all this,’ he concluded, ‘I know just from books. Imagine what the real thing will be like.’

It will be dirty, and human, thought Ezio coldly. Like everywhere else. But he showed his friend an agreeable smile. Leonardo was a dreamer. Dreamers should be allowed to dream.

They had entered a gorge, and their voices echoed off its rocky sides. Ezio, scanning the almost invisible crests of the cliffs that hemmed them in on both sides, was suddenly tense. The outriders had gone on ahead, but he ought to have

been able, in this confined space, to hear the clatter of their horses. However, no sound came. A light mist had sprung up, together with a sudden chill, neither of which did anything to reassure him. Leonardo was oblivious, but Ezio could see that the wagoners had become tense too, and were looking warily about them.

Suddenly, a scattering of small pebbles came clattering down the rocky side of the gorge, causing Ezio's horse to shy. He looked up, squinting against the indifferent sun, high above, against which he could see an eagle soar.

Now even Leonardo was aware. 'What's wrong?' he asked.

'We're not alone,' said Ezio. 'There may be enemy archers up on the cliffs above us.'

But then he heard the thundering hooves of horses, several horses, approaching them from behind.

Ezio wheeled his horse, to see half a dozen cavalry approaching. The banner they bore was a red cross on a yellow shield.

'Borgia!' he muttered, drawing his sword as a crossbow bolt hammered into the side of the wagon. The wagoners themselves were already fleeing up the road ahead, and even the oxen were affected, for they lumbered slowly forward of their own volition.

'Take the reins and keep them going,' Ezio cried to Leonardo. 'It's me they're after, not you. Just keep going, whatever happens!'

Leonardo hastened to obey as Ezio rode back to meet the horsemen. His sword, one of Mario's, was well balanced by its pommel, and his horse was lighter and more manoeuvrable than those of his adversaries. But they were well armoured, and there would be no chance to use his Codex blades. Ezio dug his heels into the flanks of his horse, spurring it on into the thick of the enemy. Ducking low in the saddle, Ezio smashed into the group, the force of his charge causing two of their horses to rear violently. Then the swordplay began in earnest. The protective brace he wore on his left forearm deflected many blows, however, and he was able to take advantage of the surprise of a foeman when he saw that his blow did not land, to get in a meaningful blow of his own.

It was not long before he had unseated four of the men, leaving the two survivors to wheel round and gallop back the way they had come. This time, however, he knew that he must allow no one even the chance of getting back to Rodrigo. He galloped after them, cutting first one, and then the other, down off his horse as he caught up with them.

He searched the bodies swiftly, but neither yielded anything of note; then he dragged them to the roadside and covered them with rocks and stones. He remounted and rode back, pausing only to clear the road of the other corpses and give them a rudimentary burial, at least enough to conceal them, with the stones

and brushwood he had at hand. There was nothing he could do about their horses, which by now had run away.

Ezio had escaped Rodrigo's vengeance once more, but he knew the Borgia cardinal would not give up until he was assured of his death. He dug his heels into his horse's flanks and rode to rejoin Leonardo. When he caught up, they looked for the wagoners and called their names in vain.

'I paid them a huge deposit on this wagon and oxen,' grumbled Leonardo. 'I don't suppose I'll ever see it again.'

'Sell them in Venice.'

'Don't they use gondolas there?'

'Plenty of farms on the mainland.'

Leonardo looked at him. 'By God, Ezio, I like a practical man!'

Their long cross-country journey continued, past the ancient town of Forlì, now a small city-state in its own right, and on to Ravenna and its port on the coast a few miles beyond. There they took ship, a coastal galley on its way from Ancona to Venice, and once he had ascertained that no one else on board presented any danger, Ezio managed to relax a little. But he was aware that, even on a relatively small ship like this, it would not be too difficult to slit someone's throat at night and cast their body into the blue-black waters, and he watched alertly the comings and goings at every little harbour they put into.

However, they arrived several days later at the Venice dockyards without incident. Only here did Ezio encounter his next setback, and that was from an unexpected source.

They had disembarked and were waiting now for the local ferry, which would take them to the island city. It duly arrived, and sailors helped Leonardo move his wagon on to the boat, which wallowed alarmingly under its weight. The ferry captain told Leonardo that some of the Conte da Pexaro's staff would be waiting on the quay to conduct him to his new quarters, and with a bow and a smile handed him on board. 'You have your pass, of course, *signore*?'

'Of course,' said Leonardo, handing the man a paper.

'And you, sir?' inquired the captain politely, turning to Ezio.

Ezio was taken aback. He had arrived without an invitation, unaware of this local law. 'But – I have no pass,' he said.

'It's all right,' put in Leonardo, speaking to the captain. 'He is with me. I can vouch for him and I am sure that the *Conte* –'

But the captain held up a hand. 'I regret, *signore*. The rules of the Council are explicit. No one may enter the city of Venice without a pass.'

Leonardo was about to remonstrate, but Ezio stopped him. 'Don't worry, Leonardo. I'll find a way round this.'

‘I wish I could help you, sir,’ said the captain. ‘But I have my orders.’ In a louder voice directed at the crowd of passengers in general, he announced: ‘Attention please! Attention please! The ferry will depart at the stroke of ten!’ Ezio knew that gave him a little time.

His attention was caught by an extremely well-dressed couple whom he had noticed joining the galley at the same time as he had, who had taken the best cabin, and who had kept very much to themselves. Now they were alone at the foot of one of the piers, where several private gondolas were moored, and clearly in the middle of a very acrimonious row.

‘My beloved, please –’ the man was saying. A weak-looking type, and twenty years older than his companion, a spirited redhead with fiery eyes.

‘Girolamo – you are nothing but a fool! God knows why I ever married you but He also knows how much I’ve suffered as a result! You never cease to find fault, you keep me cooped up like a chicken in your horrible little provincial town, and now – now! You can’t even organize a gondola to get us to Venice! And when I think your uncle’s the bloody Pope, no less! You’d think you’d be able to exert some influence. But look at you – you’ve got about as much backbone as a slug!’

‘Caterina –’

‘Don’t you “Caterina” me, you toad! Just get the men to deal with the luggage and for God’s sake get me to Venice. I need a bath and I need wine!’

Girolamo bridled. ‘I’ve a good mind to leave you here and go on to Pordenone without you.’

‘We should have gone by land in any case.’

‘It’s too dangerous, travelling by road.’

‘Yes! For a spineless creature like you!’

Girolamo was silent as Ezio continued to watch. Then he said cunningly, ‘Why don’t you step into this gondola here –’ he indicated one, ‘and I will find a pair of gondoliers immediately.’

‘Hmmn! Talking sense at last!’ she growled and allowed him to hand her into the boat. But once she was settled, Girolamo quickly cast off its painter and gave the prow a mighty shove, sending the gondola off into the lagoon.

‘*Buon viaggio*!’ he shouted nastily.

‘*Bastardo*!’ she flung back. Then, realizing her predicament, she began to shout, ‘*Aiuto! Aiuto!*’ But Girolamo was walking back to where a knot of servants hovered uncertainly round a stack of luggage, and started giving them orders. Presently he moved off with them and the baggage to another part of the dock, where he started organizing a private ferry for himself.

Meanwhile Ezio had watched the plight of the woman Caterina, half-amused, certainly, but also half-concerned. She fixed him with her eye.

'Hey, you! Don't just stand there! I need *help*!'

Ezio unbuckled his sword, slipped off his shoes and doublet, and dived in.

Back on the quay, a smiling Caterina gave a dripping Ezio her hand. 'My hero,' she said.

'It was nothing.'

'I might have drowned! For all that *porco* cares!' She looked at Ezio appreciatively. 'But you! My goodness, you must be *strong*. I couldn't believe how you managed to swim back pulling the gondola by its rope with me in it.'

'As light as a feather,' said Ezio.

'Flatterer!'

'I mean, those boats are so well balanced –'

Caterina frowned.

'It was an honour to serve you, *signora*,' Ezio finished, lamely.

'I must return the favour some day,' she said, her eyes full of the meaning behind her words. 'What is your name?'

'Auditore, Ezio.'

'I'm Caterina.' She paused. 'Where are you bound?'

'I was going to Venice, but I have no pass, so the ferry –'

'*Basta*!' She interrupted him. 'So this little official wouldn't let you on, is that it?'

'Yes.'

'We'll see about that!' She stormed off down the jetty without waiting for Ezio to put on his shoes and doublet. By the time he caught up with her she had reached the ferry and was already, from what he could gather, giving the quaking man an earful. All he could hear as he arrived was the captain burbling in the most servile way: 'Yes, *Altezza*; of course, *Altezza*; whatever you say, *Altezza*.'

'It had better be as I say! Unless you want your head on a spike! Here he is! Go and fetch his horse and his things yourself! Go on! And treat him well! I'll know about it if you don't!' The captain hurried away. Caterina turned to Ezio. 'There, you see? Settled!'

'Thank you, Madonna.'

'One good turn –' She looked at him. 'But I hope our paths cross again.' She held out her hand. 'I am from Forlì. Come there one day. It would be my pleasure to welcome you.' She gave him her hand, and was about to depart.

'Don't you want to get to Venice too?'

She looked at him again, and at the ferry. ‘On this scrapheap? Don’t jest with me!’ And she was gone, sailing along the quay in the direction of her husband, who was just seeing the last of their luggage loaded.

The captain scuttled up, leading Ezio’s horse. ‘Here you are sir. My most humble apologies, sir. Had I but known, sir…’

‘I’ll need my horse stabled when we arrive.’

‘It’ll be my pleasure, sir.’

As the ferry pulled away and set off across the lead-coloured water of the lagoon, Leonardo, who’d watched the whole episode, said wryly, ‘You know who that was, don’t you?’

‘I wouldn’t mind if she were my next conquest,’ smiled Ezio.

‘Then watch your step! That’s Caterina Sforza, the daughter of the Duke of Milan. And her husband’s the Duke of Forlì, and a nephew of the Pope.’

‘What’s his name?’

‘Girolamo Riario.’

Ezio was silent. The surname rang a bell. Then he said, ‘Well, he married a fireball.’

‘As I say,’ replied Leonardo. ‘Watch your step.’

12

Venice in 1481, under the steady rule of Doge Giovanni Mocenigo, was, on the whole, a good place to be. There was peace with the Turks, the city prospered, the trade routes by sea and land were secure, interest rates were admittedly high, but investors were bullish, and savers content. The Church was wealthy too, and artists flourished under the dual patronage of their spiritual and temporal patrons. The city, rich from the wholesale looting of Constantinople after the Fourth Crusade, diverted by Doge Dandolo from its true object, had brought Byzantium to its knees, displayed the booty unashamedly: the four bronze horses ranged along the upper façade of St Mark's Basilica being the most obvious.

But Leonardo and Ezio, arriving at the Molo on that early summer morning, had no idea of the city's debased, treacherous and pilfering past. They only saw the glory of the pink marble and brickwork of the Palazzo Ducale, the broad square reaching forwards and to the left, the brick campanile of astonishing height, and the slightly built Venetians themselves, in their dark clothes, flitting like shadows along the *terra ferma*, or navigating their labyrinthine, malodorous canals in a variety of boats, from elegant gondolas to ungainly barges, the latter laden with all sorts of produce, from fruit to bricks.

The Conte da Pexaro's servants took charge of Leonardo's effects and, at his suggestion, also took charge of Ezio's horse, and further promised to arrange suitable lodgings for the young banker's son from Florence. They then dispersed, leaving one behind, a fat, sallow young man with bulging eyes, whose shirt was damp with sweat, and whose smile would have made syrup hang its head in shame.

'*Altezze*,' he simpered, approaching them. 'Allow me to introduce myself. I am Nero, the Conte's personal *funzionario da accoglienza*. It will be my duty

and my pleasure to offer you a short guided introduction to our proud city before the *Conte* receives you…' here Nero looked nervously between Leonardo and Ezio, trying to decide which of the two was the commissioned artist, and luckily for him settled on Leonardo, the one who looked less like a man of action, '… *Messer* Leonardo, for a glass of Veneto before dinner, which meal *Messer* will be pleased to take in the upper servants' hall.' He bowed and scraped a little more, for good measure. 'Our gondola awaits…'

For the next half-hour, Ezio and Leonardo were able – indeed, obliged – to enjoy the beauties of La Serenissima from the best place that it is possible to enjoy them – a gondola, expertly managed by its fore-and-aft gondoliers. But the enjoyment was marred by Nero's oily spiel. Ezio, despite his interest in the unique beauty and architecture of this place, still wet from his rescue of Madonna Caterina, and tired, tried to find refuge in sleep from Nero's dreary monologuing, but suddenly he snapped awake. Something had caught his attention.

From the canal bank, not far from the palace of the Marchese de Ferrara, Ezio heard raised voices. Two armed guards were harassing a businessman.

'You were told to stay at home, sir,' said one of the uniforms.

'But the rent is paid. I have every right to sell my wares here.'

'Sorry, sir, but it's in contravention of *Messer* Emilio's new rules. I'm afraid you're in rather a serious situation, sir.'

'I'll appeal to the Council of Ten!'

'No time for that, sir,' said the second uniform, kicking down the awning of the businessman's stall. The man was selling leather goods, and the uniforms, between them, while pocketing the best, threw most of his wares into the canal.

'Now, let's not have any more of this nonsense, sir,' said one of the uniforms, as they swaggered off, unhurriedly.

'What's going on?' Ezio asked Nero.

'Nothing, *Altezza*. A little local difficulty. I beg you to ignore. And now we are about to pass under the famous wooden bridge of the Rialto, the *only* bridge over the Grand Canal, famed in all history for…'

Ezio was happy to let the poor bugger ramble on, but what he had seen had disturbed him, and he had heard the name Emilio. A common enough Christian name – but: Emilio *Barbarigo*?

Not long afterwards, Leonardo insisted that they stop so that he could look at a market with stands selling children's toys. He went up to the one that had caught his eye immediately. 'Look, Ezio,' he cried.

'What have you found?'

‘It’s a lay figure. A little articulated manikin we artists use as models. I could do with a couple. Would you be so kind – ? I seem to have sent my purse with my bags to my new workshop.’

But as Ezio was reaching for his own purse, a bunch of young people pushed past them, and one of them tried to cut his purse from his belt.

‘Hey!’ yelled Ezio. ‘*Coglione!* Stop!’ And he raced after them. The one he’d marked as his attacker turned for an instant, pushing a tress of auburn hair clear of the face. A woman’s face! But then she was gone, vanishing into the crowd with her companions.

They resumed their tour in silence, Leonardo, however, now contentedly clutching his two lay figures. Ezio was impatient to be rid of the buffoon who was their guide, and even of Leonardo. He needed time alone, time to think.

‘And now we approach the famous Palazzo Seta,’ Nero droned on. ‘Home of *Su Altezza* Emilio Barbarigo. *Messer* Barbarigo is famous at present for his attempts to unify the merchants of the city under his guiding control. A laudable undertaking which has, alas, encountered some resistance from the more radical elements in the city…’

A grim fortified building stood back from the canal, allowing for a flagstoned space in front of it, at whose quay three gondolas were moored. As their own gondola passed, Ezio noticed the same businessman he had seen harassed earlier try to enter the building. He was being held back by two more guards, and Ezio noticed on their shoulders a yellow blazon crossed with a red chevron, below it a black horse, above it a dolphin, star and grenade. Barbarigo men, of course!

‘My stall has been destroyed, my goods ruined. I demand compensation!’ the businessman was saying in an angry tone.

‘Sorry sir, we’re closed,’ said one of the uniforms, poking the poor man with his halberd.

‘I haven’t finished with you. I’ll report you to the Council!’

‘Much good may it do you,’ snapped the older, second uniform. But now an officer and three more men appeared.

‘Causing an affray, are we?’ said the officer.

‘No, I –’

‘Arrest this man!’ barked the officer.

‘What are you doing?’ said the businessman, frightened. Ezio watched powerless and in growing anger, but he had marked the place in his mind. The businessman was dragged off in the direction of the building, where a small ironclad door opened to admit him, and immediately closed behind him.

‘You haven’t chosen the best of places, though it may be the prettiest,’ Ezio told Leonardo.

‘I am beginning to wish that I’d plumped for Milan after all,’ replied Leonardo. ‘But a job is a job.’

13

After Ezio had taken leave of Leonardo and settled into his own lodgings, he wasted no time in making his way back to the Palazzo Seta, not an easy task in this city of alleyways, twisting canals, low arches, little squares and dead-ends. But everyone knew the palazzo, and locals willingly gave him directions when he got lost – though they all seemed at a loss as to why anybody should wish to go there of their own free will. One or two suggested that it would be simplest for him to take a gondola, but Ezio wanted to familiarize himself with the city, as well as to arrive at his goal unnoticed.

It was late afternoon as he approached the palazzo, though it was less of a palace than a fortress, or a prison, since the main building complex had been erected within the battlemented walls. On either side it was hemmed in by other buildings which were separated from it by narrow streets, but to its rear was what looked like a sizeable garden surrounded by another high wall, and at the front, facing the canal, was the wide, open area Ezio had seen earlier. Here now, though, a pitched battle seemed to be taking place between a bunch of Barbarigo guardsmen and a motley group of young people who were taunting them and then skipping lightly out of reach of their swinging halberds and stabbing pikes, throwing bricks, stones, and rotten eggs and fruit at the infuriated uniforms. Perhaps they were just creating a diversion, for Ezio, looking beyond them, could see a figure scaling the wall of the palazzo beyond the scene of the mêlée. Ezio was impressed – the wall was so sheer that even he would have thought twice about tackling it. But whoever it was reached the battlements without detection or difficulty, and then, astoundingly, leapt up from them to land on the roof of one of the watchtowers. Ezio could see that the person was planning to jump again from there to the roof of the palace itself and try to gain access to the

interior from there, and he made a note of the tactic should he ever need – or be able – to use it himself. But the guards in the watchtower had heard the person land, and called a warning to their fellows on guard in the palace proper. A bowman appeared at a window in the eaves of the palace roof and fired. The figure jumped gracefully and the arrow went wide, clattering off the tiles, but the second time the archer fired his aim was true, and, with a faint cry, the figure staggered, clutching a wounded thigh.

The bowman fired again, but missed, since the figure had retraced its steps, skipping from the tower roof back down to the battlements, along which other guardsmen were already running, then leapt back over the wall and half-slid, half-fell down it to the ground.

On the other side of the open space in front of the palazzo, the Barbarigo guards were pushing their attackers back into the alleyways beyond, down which they were beginning to pursue them. Ezio took this opportunity to catch up with the figure, which was beginning to limp away to safety in the opposite direction.

When he caught up, he was struck by the person's light, boy-like, but athletic shape. As he was about to offer his assistance, the person turned towards him and he recognized the face of the girl who'd tried to cut his purse in the market earlier.

He found himself surprised, confused, and – curiously – smitten.

'Give me your arm,' said the girl, urgently.

'Don't you remember me?'

'Should I?'

'I'm the one you tried to rob in the market today.'

'I'm sorry but this is no time for comfortable reminiscences. If we don't get out of sight fast we'll be dead meat.'

As if to illustrate her point, an arrow whizzed past between them. Ezio put her arm round his shoulders, and his round her waist, supporting her as he had once supported Lorenzo. 'Where to?'

'The canal.'

'Of course,' he said sarcastically. 'There's only one in Venice, isn't there?'

'You're damned cocky for a newcomer. This way – I'll show you – but be quick! Look – they're after us already.' And it was true that a small detachment of men had started across the cobblestones towards them.

One hand gripping her wounded thigh, and tense with pain, she guided Ezio down an alley, which led to another, and another, and another, until Ezio had lost all sense of the compass points. Behind them, the voices of the men pursuing them gradually receded and then were lost.

‘Hirelings brought in from the mainland,’ said the girl in tones of great contempt. ‘Don’t stand a chance in this city against us locals. Get lost too easily. Come *on*!’

They had arrived at a jetty on the Canale della Misericordia. A nondescript boat was tied up there with two men in it. On seeing Ezio and the girl, one immediately started to unloop the mooring-rope, while the other helped them in.

‘Who’s he?’ the second man asked the girl.

‘No idea, but he was in the right place at the right time and apparently he’s no friend of Emilio’s.’

But she was close to fainting now.

‘Wounded in the thigh,’ said Ezio.

‘I can’t take that out now,’ said the man, looking at the bolt where it had lodged. ‘I haven’t got any balsam or bandages here. We must get her back fast, and before those sewer-rats of Emilio’s catch up with us.’ He looked at Ezio. ‘Who are you anyway?’

‘My name is Auditore, Ezio. From Florence.’

‘Hmmn. Mine’s Ugo. She’s Rosa, and the guy up there with the paddle is Paganino. We don’t like strangers much.’

‘Who are you?’ Ezio replied, ignoring the last remark.

‘Professional liberators of other people’s property,’ said Ugo.

‘Thieves,’ explained Paganino with a laugh.

‘You take the poetry out of everything,’ said Ugo, sadly. The he suddenly became alert. ‘Watch out!’ he yelled as one arrow, then another, thudded into the hull of the boat from somewhere above. Looking up, they could see two Barbarigo bowmen on a nearby rooftop, fitting fresh arrows to their longbows. Ugo scrabbled in the well of the boat and came up with a businesslike, stubby crossbow, which he quickly loaded, aimed and fired, while at the same time Ezio flung two throwing-knives in quick succession at the other archer. Both bowmen plunged screaming into the canal below.

‘That bastard’s got goons everywhere,’ said Ugo to Paganino in a conversational tone.

They were both short, broad-shouldered, tough-looking men in their twenties. They handled the boat skilfully and evidently knew the canal system like the backs of their hands, for more than once Ezio was convinced they had turned into the aquatic version of a blind alley only to find that it ended not in a brick wall but a low arch under which the boat could just pass, if they all bent low.

‘What were you doing attacking the Palazzo Seta?’ Ezio asked.

‘What’s it to you?’ answered Ugo.

‘Emilio Barbarigo is no friend of mine. Perhaps we can help each other.’

‘What makes you think we need your help?’ retorted Ugo.

‘Come on, Ugo,’ said Rosa. ‘Look what he’s just done. And you’re also overlooking the fact that he saved my life. I’m the best climber of the lot of us. Without me, we’ll never get inside that viper’s nest.’ She turned her face to Ezio. ‘Emilio is trying to get a monopoly on trade within the city. He’s a powerful man, and he has several councillors in his pocket. It’s getting to the stage when any businessman who defies him and tries to maintain his independence is simply silenced.’

‘But you aren’t merchants – you’re thieves.’

‘*Professional* thieves,’ she corrected him. ‘Individual businesses, individual shops, individual people – they all make for easier pickings than any corporate monopoly. Anyway, they have insurance, and the insurance companies pay up after fleecing their customers of giant premiums. So everyone’s happy. Emilio would turn Venice into a desert for the likes of us.’

‘Not to mention that he’s a piece of shit who wants to take over not just local business, but the city itself,’ put in Ugo. ‘But Antonio will explain.’

‘Antonio? Who’s he?’

‘You’ll find out soon enough, Mr Florentine.’

At last they reached another jetty and tied up, moving quickly, since Rosa’s wound needed to be cleaned and treated if she were not to die. Leaving Paganino with the boat, Ugo and Ezio between them half-dragged, half-carried Rosa, who had by now all but lost consciousness from loss of blood, the short distance down yet another twisting lane of dark-red brick and wood to a small square, a well and a tree at its centre, and surrounded by dirty-looking buildings from which the stucco had long since peeled.

They made their way to the dirty-crimson door of one of the buildings and Ugo rapped a complex pattern of knocks on it. A peephole opened and shut, and the door was swiftly opened and as swiftly closed. Whatever else had been neglected, Ezio noticed, hinges and locks and bolts were well oiled and free of rust.

He found himself in a shabby courtyard surrounded by high, streaky grey walls, which were punctuated by windows. Two wooden staircases ran up on either side to join wooden galleries that ran all round the walls at first- and second-floor level, and from which a number of doorways led.

A handful of people, some of whom Ezio recognized from the mêlée outside the Palazzo Seta earlier, gathered round. Ugo was already issuing orders. ‘Where’s Antonio? Go get him! – And clear some space for Rosa, get a blanket, some balsam, hot water, a sharp knife, bandages…’

A man raced up one of the staircases and vanished through a first-floor doorway. Two women unrolled a very nearly clean mat and laid Rosa tenderly down on it. A third disappeared to return with the medical kit Ugo had requested. Rosa recovered consciousness, saw Ezio, and reached a hand out to him. He took her hand and knelt down by her.

'Where are we?'

'I think this must be your people's headquarters. In any case, you're safe.'

She squeezed his hand. 'I'm sorry I tried to rob you.'

'Think nothing of it.'

'Thank you for saving my life.'

Ezio looked anxious. She was very pale. They would have to work fast if they were indeed going to save her.

'Don't worry, Antonio will know what to do,' Ugo told him as he stood up again.

Hurrying down one of the staircases came a well-dressed man in his late thirties, a large gold earring in his left earlobe and a scarf on his head. He made straight for Rosa and knelt by her, snapping his fingers for the medical kit.

'Antonio!' she said.

'What's happened to you, my little darling?' he said in the harsh accent of the born Venetian.

'Just get this thing out of me!' snarled Rosa.

'Let me take a look first,' said Antonio, his voice suddenly more serious. He examined the wound carefully. 'Clean entry and exit through your thigh, missed the bone. Lucky it wasn't a crossbow bolt.'

Rosa gritted her teeth. 'Just. Get it. Out.'

'Give her something to bite on,' said Antonio. He snapped off the arrow's fletching, wrapped a cloth round the head, soaked the points of entry and exit with balsam, and pulled.

Rosa spat out the wadding they'd placed between her teeth and screamed.

'I am sorry, *piccola*,' said Antonio, keeping his hands pressed on both points of the wound.

'Go fuck yourself with your apologies, Antonio!' yelped Rosa, as the women held her down.

Antonio looked up to one of his entourage. 'Michiel! Go and fetch Bianca!' He cast a sharp eye on Ezio. 'And you! Help me with this! Take those compresses and hold them on the wounds as soon as I remove my hands. Then we can bandage her properly.'

Ezio hastened to obey. He felt the warmth of Rosa's upper thigh under his hands, felt the reaction of her body to them, and tried not to meet her eyes.

Meanwhile Antonio worked quickly, elbowing Ezio aside at last, and finally gently articulating Rosa's immaculately bandaged leg. 'Good,' he said. 'It'll be a while before we have you scaling any battlements again, but I think you'll make a full recovery. Just be patient. I know you!'

'Did you have to hurt me so much, you clumsy *idiota*?' she flared at him. 'I hope you catch the plague, you bastard! You and your whore of a mother!'

'Take her inside,' said Antonio, smiling. 'Ugo, go with her. Make sure she gets some rest.'

Four of the women picked up the corners of the mat and carried the still-protesting Rosa through one of the ground-floor doors. Antonio watched them go, then turned again to Ezio. 'Thank you,' he said. 'That little bitch is most dear to me. If I had lost her –'

Ezio shrugged. 'I've always had a soft spot for damsels in distress.'

'I'm glad Rosa didn't hear you say that, Ezio Auditore. But your reputation goes before you.'

'I didn't hear Ugo tell you my name,' said Ezio, on his guard.

'He didn't. But we know all about your work in Florence and San Gimignano. Good work too, if a little unrefined.'

'Who are you people?'

Antonio spread his hands. 'Welcome to the headquarters of the Guild of Professional Thieves and Whoremongers of Venice,' he said. 'I am de Magianis, Antonio – the *amministratore*.' He gave an ironic bow. 'But of course we only steal from the rich to give to the poor, and of course our whores prefer to call themselves courtesans.'

'And you know why I am here?'

Antonio smiled. 'I have an idea – but it's not one I've shared with any of my… employees. Come! We should go to my office and talk.'

The office reminded Ezio so vividly of Uncle Mario's study that at first he was taken aback. He didn't know what he had expected exactly, but here he was confronted by a book-lined room, expensive books in good bindings, fine Ottoman carpets, walnut and boxwood furniture, and silver-gilt sconces and candelabras.

The room was dominated by a table at its centre, on which sat a large-scale model of the Palazzo Seta and its immediate environs. Innumerable tiny wooden manikins were distributed around and within it. Antonio waved Ezio to a chair and busied himself over a comfortable-looking stove in one corner, from which a curiously attractive but unfamiliar smell wafted.

'Can I offer you something?' Antonio said. He reminded Ezio so much of Uncle Mario that it was uncanny. '*Biscotti*? *Un caffè*?'

‘Excuse me – a what?’

‘A coffee.’ Antonio straightened himself. ‘It’s an interesting concoction, brought to me by a Turkish merchant. Here, try some.’ And he passed Ezio a tiny white porcelain cup filled with a hot black liquid from which the pungent aroma came.

Ezio tasted it. It burned his lips, but it wasn’t bad, and he said so, but added, injudiciously, ‘It might be better with cream and sugar.’

‘The most certain way to ruin it,’ snapped Antonio, offended. They finished their coffees, however, and Ezio soon felt a certain nervous energetic buzz that was new to him. He would have to tell Leonardo about this drink when he next saw him. As for now, Antonio was pointing at the model of the Palazzo Seta.

‘These were the positions we had planned if Rosa had succeeded in getting in and opening one of the postern-gates. But as you know, she was seen and shot and we had to withdraw. Now we will have to regroup, and in the meantime Emilio will have time to strengthen his defences. Worse than that, this operation was costly. I am almost down to my last *soldo*.’

‘Emilio must be loaded,’ said Ezio. ‘Why not attack again now and relieve him of his money?’

‘Don’t you listen? Our resources are under strain and he is on the alert. We could never overcome him without the element of surprise. Besides, he has two powerful cousins, the brothers Marco and Agostino, to back him up, though I believe Agostino at least to be a good man. As for Mocenigo, well, the Doge is a good man, but he is unworldly, and leaves matters of business to others – others who are already in Emilio’s pocket.’ He looked hard at Ezio. ‘We need help to fill our coffers again. I think you may be able to provide that help. If you do, it will demonstrate to me that you are an ally worth helping. Might you undertake such a mission, Mr Cream-and-Sugar?’

Ezio smiled. ‘Try me,’ he said.

14

It took a long time, and Ezio's interview with the sceptical Chief Treasurer of the Thieves' Guild had been uncomfortable, but Ezio was able to use the skills he'd learned from Paola to cut purses with the best of them, and to rob the rich burghers of Venice allied with Emilio of as much as he could get. A few months later, in the company of other thieves – for he was now an Honorary Member of the Guild – he had brought in the two thousand *ducati* Antonio needed to relaunch his operation against Emilio. But there was a cost. Not all the Guild members had escaped capture and arrest by the Barbarigo Guards. So that, while the Thieves now had the funds they needed, their manpower had been depleted.

But Emilio Barbarigo made an arrogant mistake. To make an example of them, he placed the captured thieves on public display in cramped iron cages around the district he controlled. If he'd kept them in the dungeons of his palazzo, God himself would not have been able to get them out, but Emilio preferred to show them off, deprived of food and water, prodded with sticks by his guards whenever they sought sleep, and meant to starve them to death in full public view.

'They won't last six days without water, let alone food,' Ugo said to Ezio.

'What does Antonio say?'

'That it's up to you to plan a rescue.'

How much more proof of my loyalty does the man need, thought Ezio, before he realized that he already had Antonio's confidence, to the extent that the Prince of Thieves was entrusting to him this most crucial mission. He hadn't much time.

Carefully, Ugo and he observed in secret the comings and goings of the Watch. It appeared that one group of guards continuously passed from one cage

to the next. Though each cage was constantly surrounded by a clutch of curious rubberneckers, among whom there may well have been Barbarigo spies, Ezio and Ugo decided to take the risk. On the night shift, when there were far fewer observers about, they made their way to the first cage when the Guard was just about to leave for the second. Once the Guard had departed and were out of sight and earshot, they managed to spring the locks, their spirits raised by a desultory cheer from the handful of bystanders, who couldn't care less one way or the other who had the upper hand so long as they were entertained, and some of whom followed them to the second cage, and even to the third. The men and women they liberated, twenty-seven in number, were already, after two and a half days, in a sorry plight, but at least they had not been individually manacled, and Ezio led them to the wells that could be found in the centre of almost every frequent square, so that their first and most important need – thirst – was satisfied.

At the end of the mission, which took from candlelight until cock-crow, Ugo and his liberated associates looked at Ezio with deep respect. 'Rescuing my brothers and sisters was more than just an act of charity, Ezio,' said Ugo. 'These… colleagues will play a vital role in the weeks to come. And –' his tone became solemn, '– our Guild owes you an undying debt of gratitude.'

The group had arrived back at the Guild's headquarters. Antonio embraced Ezio, but his face was grave.

'How is Rosa?' asked Ezio.

'Better, but she was hurt worse than we thought, and she tries to run before she can walk!'

'Sounds like her.'

'It's typical.' Antonio paused. 'She wants to see you.'

'I'm flattered.'

'Why be? You are the hero of the hour!'

Some days later, Ezio was summoned to Antonio's office and found him poring over his model of the Palazzo Seta. The little wooden manikins had been redeployed around it, and there was a pile of papers covered in calculations and notes on the table by its side.

'Ah! Ezio!'

'*Signore*.'

'I have just returned from a little foray of my own into enemy territory. We managed to liberate three boatloads of armoury destined for dear Emilio's little palazzo. So we thought we might organize a little fancy-dress party, with us dressed in the uniforms of Barbarigo archers.'

‘Brilliant. That should get us into his fortress without any problem. When do we start?’

Antonio held up a hand. ‘Not so fast, my dear. There is a problem, and I’d like to ask your advice.’

‘You honour me.’

‘No, I just value your judgement. The fact is, I have it on the best authority that some of my people have been suborned by Emilio and are now his agents.’ He paused. ‘We cannot strike until the traitors are dealt with. Look, I know I can depend on you, and your face is not well known within the Guild. If I were able to give you certain pointers about the whereabouts of these traitors, do you think you could deal with them? You can take Ugo with you as back-up, and whatever task-force you may require.’

‘*Messer* Antonio, the fall of Emilio is as important to me as it is to you. Let us join hands in this.’

Antonio smiled. ‘The very answer I expected from you!’ He gestured Ezio to join him at a map table which had been set up near the window. ‘Here is a plan of the city. The men of mine who have defected meet, as my own loyal spies tell me, in a taverna here. It’s called Il Vecchio Specchio. There they make contact with Emilio’s agents, exchange information, and take their orders.’

‘How many?’

‘Five.’

‘What do you want me to do with them?’

Antonio looked at him. ‘Why, kill them, my friend.’

Ezio summoned the group he had hand-picked for the mission the following day at sunset. He had laid his plans. He dressed them all in Barbarigo uniforms from the boats Antonio had sequestered. Emilio, he knew from Antonio, believed that the stolen equipment had been lost at sea, so his people would suspect nothing. Together with Ugo and four others, he descended on Il Vecchio Specchio soon after dark. It was a Barbarigo hangout, but at that time of night only a handful of customers were there, apart from the turncoats and their Barbarigo controls. They hardly looked up as they saw a group of Barbarigo guards enter the inn, and it was only when they were surrounded that their attention turned to the newcomers. Ugo pulled back his hood, revealing himself in the half-light of the taverna. The conspirators made to rise, astonishment and fear written in their faces. Ezio placed a firm hand on the shoulder of the nearest traitor, then with a detached economy of effort thrust his now-released Codex blade between the man’s eyes. Ugo and the others followed suit and dispatched their traitorous brethren.

In the meantime, Rosa had continued to make a gradual and ever-impatient recovery. She was up and about, but she depended on a cane to get around, and her damaged leg was still swathed in bandages. Ezio, despite himself, and constantly making mental apologies to Cristina Calfucci, spent as much of his time as he could in her company.

'*Salute*, Rosa,' he said on a typical morning. 'How are things? I see your leg is healing.'

Rosa shrugged. 'It's taking for ever, but I'm getting there. And you? How are you finding our little town?'

'It is a great city. But how do you cope with the smell of the canals?'

'We're used to it. We wouldn't like the dust and filth of Florence.' She paused. 'So, what brings you to me this time?'

Ezio smiled. 'What you think and also *not* what you think.' He hesitated. 'I was hoping you could teach me how to climb like you do.'

She tapped her leg. 'Time was,' she said. 'But if you are in a hurry, my friend Franco can do almost as well as me.' She raised her voice. '*Franco!*'

A lissom, dark-haired youth appeared almost instantly in the doorway, and Ezio, to his private mortification, felt a pang of jealousy that was apparent enough for Rosa to notice. She smiled. 'Don't worry, *tesoro*, he's as gay as Santo Sebastiano. But he's also as tough as old boots. Franco! I want you to show Ezio some of our tricks.' She looked out of the window. An unoccupied building opposite was covered with bamboo scaffolding tied together with leather thongs. She pointed. 'Take him up that for a start.'

Ezio spent the rest of the morning – three hours – chasing after Franco, under Rosa's strident direction. At the end of it, he could clamber up to a giddying height with almost all the speed and address of his mentor, and had learned how to jump *upwards* from one handhold to the next, though he doubted if he'd ever reach Rosa's own standard.

'Lunch lightly,' Rosa said, sparing him any praise. 'We haven't finished for the day.'

In the afternoon, in the hours of the siesta, she took him to the square of the massive redbrick Frari church. Together they looked up at its bulk. 'Climb that,' Rosa said. 'Up to the very top. And I want you back down here before I have counted three hundred.'

Ezio sweated and strained, his head swimming with the effort.

'Four hundred and thirty-nine,' announced Rosa when he rejoined her. 'Again!'

At the end of the fifth attempt an exhausted and sweating Ezio felt that all he wanted to do now was smash Rosa in the face, but that desire melted when she

smiled at him and said, ‘Two hundred and ninety-three. You’ll just about do.’

The small crowd that had gathered applauded.

15

Over the following months the Thieves' Guild tackled the tasks of reorganizing and refitting. Then, one morning, Ugo arrived at Ezio's lodgings to invite him to a meeting. Ezio packed his Codex weapons in a satchel and followed Ugo to the headquarters, where they found Antonio, in an ebullient mood, once again moving the little wooden manikins around the model of the Palazzo Seta. Ezio wondered if the man wasn't a little obsessed. Rosa, Franco and two or three of the other senior members of the Guild were also present.

'Ah, Ezio!' he smiled. 'Thanks to your recent successes we are now in a position to counter-attack. Our target is Emilio's warehouse, not far from his palazzo. This is the plan. Look!' He tapped the model and indicated lines of little blue wooden soldiers ranged around the perimeters of the warehouse. 'These are Emilio's archers. They represent our greatest danger. Under cover of night, I intend to send you and a couple of others up to the roofs of the buildings adjoining the warehouse – and I know that you are up to this task, thanks to Rosa's recent training – to drop down on the archers and dispose of them. Quietly. As you do so, our men, dressed in the Barbarigo uniforms we have captured, will move in from the alleyways around and take their places.'

Ezio pointed to the red manikins within the warehouse walls. 'What about the guards inside?'

'When you've dealt with the archers we'll gather here…' Antonio pointed to a piazza nearby which Ezio recognized as the one where Leonardo had his new workshop – he wondered briefly how his friend was progressing with his commissions, '… and discuss the next steps.'

'When do we make our move?' asked Ezio.

'Tonight!'

‘Excellent! Let me have a couple of good men. Ugo, Franco, are you with me?’ The two nodded, grinning. ‘We’ll take care of the archers and meet you as you suggest.’

‘With our men in place of their archers, they won’t suspect a thing.’

‘And the next move?’

‘Once we’ve secured the warehouse, we’ll launch an attack on the palazzo itself. But remember! Be stealthy! They must not suspect a thing!’ Antonio grinned, and spat. ‘Good luck, my friends – *in bocca al lupo*!’ He patted Ezio’s shoulder.

‘*Crepi il lupo*,’ Ezio replied, spitting too.

The operation passed off that night without a hitch. The Barbarigo archers didn’t know what had hit them, and so subtly were they replaced with Antonio’s men that the guards inside the warehouse fell quietly and without much resistance to the thieves’ onslaught, having been unaware that their comrades outside had been neutralized.

The attack on the palazzo was next on Antonio’s agenda, but Ezio insisted that he went ahead first to assess the lie of the land. Rosa, the last stages of whose recovery had been remarkable thanks to the combined skills of Antonio and Bianca, and who could now climb and leap almost as well as if she had been back to her full fitness, wanted to accompany him, but Antonio, to her anger, vetoed this. It crossed Ezio’s mind that Antonio, in the end, considered him more expendable than her, but he brushed off the thought and prepared himself for the reconnaissance mission, strapping on his left arm the Codex guard-brace with its double-dagger, and, on his right, the original spring-blade. He had a lot of difficult climbing to do, and he didn’t want to risk the poison-blade since in any circumstances it was a truly lethal weapon and he was keen to avoid any accident with it that might prove fatal to himself.

Pulling his hood up over his head and using the new techniques of upward leaping which Rosa and Franco had taught him, he stormed up the outer walls of the palazzo, silent as a shadow and drawing less attention, until he was on its roof and looking down into its garden. There he noticed two men in deep conversation. They were making for a side gate leading to a narrow, private canal which led round the back of the palazzo. Following their progress from the roof, Ezio could see that a gondola was moored at a little jetty there, its two gondoliers clad in black and its lanterns doused. Sure-footed as a gecko on the roofs and walls, he hastened down and sheltered himself in the branches of a tree from which he could hear their conversation. The two men were Emilio Barbarigo and, as Ezio recognized with a shock, none other than Carlo Grimaldi,

one of Doge Mocenigo's entourage. They were accompanied by Emilio's secretary, a spindly man dressed in grey, whose heavy reading glasses kept slipping down his nose.

'… Your little house of cards is crumbling, Emilio,' Grimaldi was saying.

'It's a minor setback, nothing more. The merchants who defy me, and that piece of shit Antonio de Magianis will soon be dead or in chains, or working the oars of a Turkish galley.'

'I'm talking about the *Assassin*. He's here, you know. That's what's made Antonio so bold. Look, we've all been robbed or burgled, and our guardsmen have been outsmarted; it's as much as I've been able to do to keep the Doge from poking his nose in.'

'The Assassin? Here?'

'You numbskull, Emilio! If the Master knew how stupid you are, you'd be dead meat. You know the damage he's already done to our cause in Florence and San Gimignano.'

Emilio made a fist of his right hand. 'I'll crush him like the bedbug he is!' he snarled.

'Well, he's certainly sucking the blood out of you. Who knows if he's not here now, listening to us as we speak?'

'Now, Carlo – you'll be telling me next you believe in ghosts.'

Grimaldi fixed him with his eyes. 'Arrogance has made you stupid, Emilio. You do not see the whole picture. You are nothing but a big fish in a small pond.'

Emilio grabbed him by the tunic, and pulled him close, angrily. 'Venice will be mine, Grimaldi! I provided all the armaments to Florence! Not my fault if that idiot Jacopo didn't use them wisely. And don't try to make things bad for me with the Master. If I wanted to, I could tell him some things about you which would –'

'Save your breath! I must go now. Remember! The meeting is set ten days from now at San Stefano, outside Fiorella's.'

'I'll remember,' said Emilio sourly. 'The Master will hear then how –'

'The Master will speak, and you will listen,' retorted Grimaldi. 'Farewell!'

He stepped into the darkened gondola as Ezio watched, and it glided off into the night.

'*Cazzo!*' muttered Emilio to his secretary as he watched the gondola disappear in the direction of the Grand Canal. 'What if he's right? What if that damned Ezio Auditore *is* here?' He brooded for a moment. 'Look, get the boatmen ready, now. Wake the bastards up if you have to. I want those crates loaded now and I want the boat ready in half an hour by your water-clock. If Grimaldi *is* speaking

the truth, I must find a place to hide, at least until the meeting. The Master will find a way of dealing with the Assassin…'

'He must be working with Antonio de Magianis,' put in the secretary.

'I know that, you idiot!' hissed Emilio. 'Now come, and help me pack the documents we spoke of before our dear friend Grimaldi came calling.'

They moved back towards the interior of the palazzo, and Ezio followed, giving away no more sense of his presence than if he had been a spirit. He blended into the shadows and his footfall was no more noticeable than a cat's. He knew Antonio would hold off the attack on the palazzo until he gave the signal, and first he wanted to get to the bottom of what Emilio was up to – what were these documents of which he had spoken?

'Why won't people listen to sense?' Emilio was saying to his secretary as Ezio continued to tail them. 'All this freedom of opportunity, it just leads to more crime! We must ensure that the State has control of all aspects of the people's lives, and at the same time gives free rein to the bankers and the private financiers. That way, society flourishes. And if those who object have to be silenced, then that is the price of progress. The Assassins belong to a bygone age. They don't realize that it's the State that matters, not the individual.' He shook his head. 'Just like Giovanni Auditore, and he was a banker himself! You'd have thought he'd have shown more integrity!'

Ezio drew in his breath sharply at the mention of his father's name, but continued to pursue his quarry as Emilio and his secretary made their way to his office, selected papers, packed them, and returned to the little jetty by the garden gate where another, larger gondola was now awaiting its master.

Emilio, taking his satchel of papers from his secretary, snapped a last order. 'Send some overnight clothes after me. You know the address.'

The secretary bowed and disappeared. There was no one else about. The gondoliers prepared to cast off, fore and aft.

Ezio sprang from his vantage-point on to the gondola, which rocked alarmingly. With two swift elbow movements, he knocked the boatmen into the water, and then had Emilio by the throat.

'Guards! Guards!' gurgled Emilio, groping for the dagger at his belt. Ezio seized his wrist just as he was about to plunge the weapon into Ezio's belly.

'Not so fast,' said Ezio.

'Assassin! You!' growled Emilio.

'Yes.'

'I killed your enemy!'

'That does not make you my friend.'

'Killing me will solve nothing for you, Ezio.'

‘I think it will rid Venice of a troublesome… bedbug,’ said Ezio, releasing his spring-blade. ‘*Requiescat in pace*.’ With barely a pause, Ezio eased the deadly steel between Emilio’s shoulder blades – death came quickly and silently. Ezio’s proficiency in killing was matched only by the cold metallic resolve with which he fulfilled the duty of his calling.

Bundling Emilio’s body over the gondola’s side, Ezio set to rifling through the papers in his satchel. There was much to interest Antonio, he thought, as he swiftly sifted through them, for there was no time now to examine them thoroughly; but there was one parchment which caught his own attention – a rolled and sealed page of vellum. Surely another Codex page!

As he was about to break the seal – *shoof!* – an arrow rattled and clanged into the baseboard of the gondola between his legs. Instantly alert, Ezio crouched, peering up in the direction the missile had come from. High above him on the ramparts of the palazzo a vast number of Barbarigo archers was ranged.

Then one of them waved. And acrobatically tumbled down from the high walls. In another second she was in his arms.

‘Sorry, Ezio – foolish prank! But we couldn’t resist.’

‘Rosa!’

She snuggled. ‘Back in the fray and ready for action!’ She looked at him with shining eyes. ‘And the Palazzo Seta is taken! We have freed the merchants who opposed Emilio, and we now control the district. Now, come! Antonio is planning a celebration, and Emilio’s wine cellars are legendary!’

Time passed, and Venice seemed to be at peace. No one mourned Emilio’s disappearance; indeed, many believed him still to be alive, and some assumed he had just gone on a journey abroad to look after his business interests in the Kingdom of Naples. Antonio made sure that the Palazzo Seta still ran like clockwork, and as long as the mercantile interests of Venice as a whole were not affected, nobody really cared about the fate of one businessman, however ambitious or successful he may have been.

Ezio and Rosa had grown closer, but a fierce rivalry still existed between them. Now she was healed, she wanted to prove herself, and one morning she came to his rooms and said, ‘Listen Ezio, I think you need a re-tune. I want to see if you’re still as good as you became when Franco and I first trained you. So – how about a race?’

‘A race?’

‘Yes!’

‘Where?’

‘From here to the Punta della Dogana. Starting *now*!’ And she leapt out of the window before Ezio could react. He watched her as she scampered over the red rooftops and seemed almost to dance across the canals that separated the buildings. Throwing off his tunic, he raced after her.

At last they arrived, neck-and-neck, on the rooftop of the wooden building that stood on the spit of land at the end of the Dorsoduro, overlooking St Mark’s Canal and the lagoon. Across the water stood the low buildings of the monastery of San Giorgio Maggiore, and opposite, the shimmering pink stone edifice which was the Palazzo Ducale.

‘Looks like I won,’ said Ezio.

She frowned. ‘Nonsense. Anyway, even by saying that, you show yourself to be no gentleman and certainly no Venetian. But what can one expect of a Florentine?’ She paused. ‘In any case you are a liar. *I* won.’

Ezio shrugged and smiled. ‘Whatever you say, *carissima*.’

‘Then, to the victor, the spoils,’ she said, pulling his head down to hers and kissing him passionately upon the lips. Her body, now, was soft and warm, and infinitely yielding.

16

Emilio Barbarigo may not have been able to make the appointment in the Campo San Stefano himself, but Ezio was certainly not going to miss it. He positioned himself in the already bustling square at dawn on that bright morning late in 1485. The battle for ascendancy over the Templars was hard and long. Ezio began to believe that, as it had been for his father and was for his uncle, it would turn out to be *his* life's work too.

His hood pulled up over his head, he melted into the crowd but stayed close as he saw the figure of Carlo Grimaldi approaching with another man, ascetic-looking, whose bushy auburn hair and beard were ill-sorted with his bluish, pallid skin, and who wore the red robes of a State Inquisitor. This, Ezio knew, was Silvio Barbarigo, Emilio's cousin, whose soubriquet was '*Il Rosso*'. He did not look in a particularly good mood.

'Where *is* Emilio?' he asked impatiently.

Grimaldi shrugged. 'I told him to be here.'

'You told him yourself? In person?'

'Yes,' Grimaldi snapped back. 'Myself! In person! I'm concerned that you don't trust me.'

'As am I,' muttered Silvio. Grimaldi gritted his teeth at that, but Silvio merely looked around, abstractedly. 'Well, perhaps he'll arrive with the others. Let's walk a while.'

They proceeded to stroll around the large, rectangular *campo*, past the church of San Vidal and the palaces at the Grand Canal end, up to San Stefano at the other, pausing from time to time to look at the wares the stallholders were setting out at the beginning of the day's trading. Ezio shadowed them, but it was

difficult. Grimaldi was on edge, and kept turning round suspiciously. At times it was all Ezio could do to keep his quarry within earshot.

'While we're waiting, you can bring me up to date with how things are at the Doge's Palace,' said Silvio.

Grimaldi spread his hands. 'Well, to be honest with you, it's not easy. Mocenigo keeps his circle close. I have tried to lay the groundwork, as you asked, making suggestions in the interest of our Cause, but of course I am not the only one vying for his attention, and old though he is, he's a canny bugger.'

Silvio picked up a complicated-looking glass figurine from a stall, inspected it, and put it back. 'Then you must work harder, Grimaldi. You must become part of his inner circle.'

'I am already one of his closest and most trusted associates. It has taken me years to establish myself. Years of patient planning, of waiting, of accepting humiliations.'

'Yes, yes,' said Silvio impatiently. 'But what have you to show for it?'

'It's harder than I expected.'

'And why is that?'

Grimaldi made a gesture of frustration. 'I don't know. I do my utmost for the State, I work hard… But the fact is, Mocenigo doesn't like me.'

'I wonder why not,' said Silvio coolly.

Grimaldi was too absorbed in his thoughts to notice the snub. 'It's not my fault! I keep trying to please the bastard! I find out what he most desires and lay it on for him – the finest jams from Sardinia, the latest fashions from Milan –'

'Maybe the Doge just doesn't like sycophants.'

'Do you think that's what I am?'

'Yes. A doormat, flatterer, a bootlicker – need I go on?'

Grimaldi looked at him. 'Don't you insult me, *Inquisitore*. You haven't a clue what it's like. You don't understand the pressure in the –'

'Oh, *I* don't understand *pressure*?'

'No! You have no idea. You may be a state official but I am two steps from the Doge almost every waking hour of the day. You wish you could be in my shoes, because you think you could do better, but –'

'Have you finished?'

'No! Just listen. I am close to the man. I have dedicated my life to establishing myself in this position, and I tell you I am convinced I can recruit Mocenigo to our Cause.' Grimaldi paused. 'I just need a little more time.'

'It seems to me that you've had more than enough time already.' Silvio broke off, and Ezio watched as he raised a hand to attract the attention of an

expensively dressed elderly man with a flowing white beard, accompanied by a bodyguard who was the largest person Ezio had ever seen.

'Good morning, Cousin,' the newcomer greeted Silvio. 'Grimaldi.'

'Greetings, Cousin Marco,' replied Silvio. He looked around. 'Where is Emilio? Did he not come with you?'

Marco Barbarigo looked surprised, then grave. 'Ah. Then you have not yet heard the news.'

'What news?'

'Emilio is dead!'

'What?' Silvio, as always, was irritated that his older and more powerful cousin should be better informed than he was. 'How?'

'I can guess,' said Grimaldi, bitterly. 'The *Assassino*.'

Marco looked at him sharply. 'It is so. They pulled his body out of one of the canals late last night. It must have been in there for – well, for long enough. They say he'd swollen up to twice his usual size. That's why he floated to the surface.'

'Where can the Assassin be hiding?' Grimaldi said. 'We must find him and kill him before he does any more damage.'

'He could be anywhere,' said Marco. 'That is why I take Dante here everywhere with me. I wouldn't feel safe without him.' He broke off. 'Why, he could be here, even now, for all we know.'

'We must act fast,' said Silvio.

'You're right,' said Marco.

'But Marco, I'm so close. I feel it. Just give me a few more days,' Grimaldi pleaded.

'No, Carlo, you've had quite enough time. We no longer have the leisure for subtlety. If Mocenigo will not join us, we must remove him and replace him with one of our own, and we must do it this very week!'

The giant bodyguard, Dante, whose eyes had not ceased to scan the crowd from the moment he and Marco Barbarigo had arrived, now spoke. 'We should keep moving, *signori*.'

'Yes,' agreed Marco. 'And the Master will be waiting. Come!'

Ezio moved like a shade among the crowds and the stalls, striving to keep the men within earshot as they crossed the square and made off down the street which led in the general direction of Saint Mark's Square.

'Will the Master agree to our new strategy?' asked Silvio.

'He'd be a fool not to.'

'You're right, we have no choice,' Silvio agreed, then looked at Grimaldi. 'Which kind of makes you redundant,' he added unpleasantly.

‘That is a matter for the Master to decide,’ retorted Grimaldi. ‘Just as he will decide whom to place in Mocenigo’s shoes – you, or your cousin Marco here. And the best person to advise him on that is me!’

‘I wasn’t aware that there was a decision to be made,’ said Marco. ‘Surely the choice is obvious to all.’

‘I agree,’ said Silvio, edgily. ‘The choice should fall on the person who organized the entire operation, the one who came up with the idea of how to save this city!’

Marco was quick to reply. ‘I would be the last to undervalue tactical intelligence, my good Silvio; but in the end it is wisdom which one needs in order to rule. Do not think otherwise.’

‘Gentlemen, please,’ said Grimaldi. ‘The Master may be able to advise the Committee of Forty-One when they meet to elect the new Doge, but he cannot sway them. And for all we know, the Master may be thinking of someone quite other than either of you…’

‘You mean yourself?’ said Silvio incredulously, while Marco merely gave vent to a sneering laugh.

‘And why not? I’m the one who’s put in all the real graft!’

‘*Signori*, please, keep moving,’ put in Dante. ‘It’ll be safer for you all when we get back inside.’

‘Of course,’ agreed Marco, quickening his pace. The others followed suit.

‘He’s a good man, your Dante,’ said Silvio. ‘How much did you pay for him?’

‘Less than he is worth,’ replied Marco. ‘He’s loyal and he’s trustworthy – he’s saved my life on two occasions. But I wouldn’t say he was exactly loquacious.’

‘Who needs conversation from a bodyguard?’

‘We’re here,’ said Grimaldi, as they arrived at a discreet door in the side of a building off the Campo Santa Maria Zobenigo. Ezio, keeping a safe distance between them and himself, aware as he was of Dante’s extreme vigilance, rounded the corner of the square just in time to see them enter. Looking round to ensure that the coast was clear, he climbed the side of the building and positioned himself on the balcony above the door. The windows to the room beyond were open, and within it, seated in a heavy oak chair behind a refectory table covered with papers, and dressed in purple velvet, sat the Spaniard. Ezio dissolved into the shadows, and waited, ready to listen to all that transpired.

Rodrigo Borgia was in a filthy mood. Already the Assassin had frustrated him in several major enterprises and escaped every attempt to kill him. Now he was in Venice and had eliminated one of the cardinal’s principal allies there. And as if that wasn’t enough, Rodrigo had had to spend the first fifteen minutes of this

meeting listening to the parcel of fools left in his service bickering about which of them should be the next Doge. The fact that he had already made his choice and greased the palms of all the key members of the Council of Forty-One seemed to have passed these idiots by. And his choice had fallen on the oldest, vainest and most pliable of the three.

'Shut up, the lot of you,' he finally spat out. 'What I need from you is discipline and unwavering dedication to the Cause, not this pusillanimous quest for self-advancement. *This* is my decision and it *will* be carried out. Marco Barbarigo will be the next Doge and he will be elected next week following the death of Giovanni Mocenigo, which, given that the man is seventy-six years old, will hardly raise an eyebrow but which nevertheless must look natural. Do you think you are capable of arranging that, Grimaldi?'

Grimaldi cast a glance at the Barbarigo cousins. Marco was preening and Silvio was trying to look dignified in his disappointment. What fools they were, he thought. Doge or no Doge, they were still the puppets of the Master, and the Master was now conferring the real responsibility on him. Grimaldi allowed himself to dream of better things as he replied, 'Of course, Master.'

'When are you closest to him?'

Grimaldi reflected. 'I have the run of the Palazzo Ducale. Mocenigo may not like me much but I do have his full confidence, and I'm at his beck and call most of the time.'

'Good. Poison him. At the first opportunity.'

'He has food tasters.'

'Good God, man, do you think I don't know that? You Venetians are supposed to be good at poisoning. Get something into his meat *after* they've tasted it. Or stick something into that Sardinian jam they tell me he's so fond of. But think of something or it'll be the worse for you!'

'Leave it to me, *su altezza*.'

Rodrigo turned his irritable gaze on Marco. 'I take it you can lay your hands on a suitable product for our purpose?'

Marco smiled deprecatingly. 'That is rather my cousin's area of expertise.'

'I should be able to lay my hands on enough *cantarella* for our purposes,' said Silvio.

'And what is that?'

'It's a most effective form of arsenic and it is very difficult to trace.'

'Good! See to it!'

'I must say, Maestro,' said Marco, 'we are lost in admiration that you should associate yourself personally so closely with this enterprise. Is that not dangerous for you?'

‘The Assassin will not dare come after me. He is clever, but he will never outwit me. In any case, I feel inclined to involve myself more directly. The Pazzi disappointed us in Florence. I hope sincerely that the Barbarigi will not do the same…’ He glowered at them.

Silvio snickered. ‘The Pazzi were a bunch of amateur –’

‘The Pazzi,’ Rodrigo interrupted him, ‘were a potent and venerable family, and they were brought to their knees by one young Assassin. Do not underestimate this troublesome foe, or he will bring the Barbarigi down too.’ He paused to let that sink in. ‘Now go, and get this done. We cannot afford another failure!’

‘What are your own plans, Master?’

‘I return to Rome. Time is of the essence!’

Rodrigo rose abruptly and left the room. From his vantage-point hidden on the balcony, Ezio watched him leave alone and cross the square, causing a flock of pigeons to scatter as he strode in the direction of the Molo. The other men soon followed him, separating and taking their own paths out of the square. When all was silent, he leapt down to the flagstones beneath and hurried off in the direction of Antonio’s headquarters.

Once there, he was met by Rosa, who greeted him with a lingering kiss. ‘Put your dagger back in its sheath,’ she smiled as their bodies pressed together.

‘You’re the one who made me draw it. And you’re the one,’ he added knowingly, ‘with its sheath.’

She took his hand. ‘Come on, then.’

‘No, Rosa, *mi dispiace veramente* but I can’t.’

‘So – you tire of me already!’

‘You know it isn’t that! But I have to see Antonio. It’s urgent.’

Rosa looked at him and saw the intense expression on his face, in his cold blue-grey eyes. ‘OK. For this once I forgive you. He’s in his office. I think he misses that model of the Palazzo Seta now that he’s got the real thing! Come!’

‘Ezio!’ said Antonio as soon as he saw him. ‘I don’t like that look. Is everything all right?’

‘I wish it was. I’ve just discovered that Carlo Grimaldi and the two Barbarigi cousins Silvio and Marco are in league with… a man I know too well, whom people call the Spaniard. They plan to murder Doge Mocenigo and replace him with one of their own.’

‘That is terrible news. With their own man as Doge they’ll have the entire Venetian fleet and trade empire in their grasp.’ He paused. ‘And they call *me* a criminal!’

‘So – you’ll help me stop them?’

Antonio extended his hand. ‘You have my word, little brother. And the support of all my men.’

‘And women,’ put in Rosa.

Ezio smiled. ‘*Grazie, amici*.’

Antonio looked thoughtful. ‘But Ezio, this will take some planning. The Palazzo Ducale is so strongly defended that it makes the Palazzo Seta look like an open park. And we don’t have time for me to have a scale model built so we can plan –’

Ezio held up his hand and said firmly, ‘Nothing is impenetrable.’

The two of them looked at him. Then Antonio laughed, and Rosa smiled naughtily. ‘Nothing is impenetrable! – No wonder we like you, Ezio!’

*

Late in the day, when there were fewer people about, Antonio and Ezio made their way to the Doge’s Palace. ‘Treachery like this no longer surprises me,’ Antonio was saying as they went. ‘Doge Mocenigo is a good man and I’m surprised he’s lasted so long. As for me, when I was a child, we were taught that the nobles were just and kind. I believed it, too. And though my father was a cobbler and my mother a scullery-maid, I aspired to be much more. I studied hard, I persevered, but I could never make myself one of the ruling class. If you aren’t born into it, acceptance is impossible. So – I ask you, Ezio, who are the true nobles of Venice? Men like Grimaldi or Marco and Silvio Barbarigo? No! We are! The thieves and the mercenaries and the whores. We keep this place going and each one of us has more honour in his little finger than the whole pack of our so-called rulers! We love Venice. The others merely see it as a means of enriching themselves.’

Ezio kept his counsel, for he could not see Antonio, good as the man was, ever wearing the *corno ducale*. In due course they arrived at St Mark’s Square, making their way round it to the pink palace. It was quite clearly heavily guarded, and although the two of them managed to clamber undetected up scaffolding which had been erected on the side wall of the cathedral which adjoined the palace, when they looked over from their vantage-point they could see that even though they could – and did – leap across on to the palace roof, access to the courtyard, even from there, was barred by a high grille whose spiked top curved outwards and downwards. Below them in the courtyard they could see the Doge himself, Giovanni Mocenigo, a dignified old man who nevertheless seemed like a shrivelled husk inhabiting the gorgeous robes and

corno of the leader of the city and the state, in conversation with his appointed murderer, Carlo Grimaldi.

Ezio listened intently.

‘Don’t you understand what I’m offering you, *Altezza*?’ Carlo was saying. ‘Listen to me, please, for this is your last chance!’

‘How dare you speak to me like that? How dare you threaten me!’ retorted the Doge.

Carlo was immediately apologetic. ‘Forgive me, sir. I meant nothing by it. But please believe that your safety is my principal concern…’

With that, the pair moved into the building and out of sight.

‘We have very little time,’ said Antonio, reading Ezio’s thoughts. ‘And there’s no way through this grille. Even if there were, look at the number of guards around. *Diavolo!*’ He swiped the air in frustration, causing a cluster of pigeons to take to the air. ‘Look at them! The birds! How easy it might be for us if we could only fly!’

Suddenly, Ezio grinned to himself. It was high time he looked up his friend Leonardo da Vinci.

17

‘Ezio! How long has it been?’ Leonardo greeted him like a long-lost brother. His workshop in Venice had taken on all the look of his workshop in Florence, but dominating it was a full-scale version of the bat-like machine whose purpose, Ezio now knew, was one which he had to take seriously. But first things first, for Leonardo.

‘Listen, Ezio, you sent me via a very nice man called Ugo another Codex page, but you never followed up on it. Have you been that busy?’

‘I have rather had my hands full,’ replied Ezio, remembering the page he had taken from Emilio Barbarigo’s effects.

‘Well, here it is.’ Leonardo rummaged in the apparent chaos of his room, but quickly came up with the neatly rolled Codex page, its seal restored. ‘There’s no new weapon-design on this one, but from the look of the symbols and the manuscript writing on it, which I believe to be Aramaic or even Babylonian, it will be a significant page in whatever jigsaw puzzle you are assembling. I think I recognize traces of a map.’ He held up his hand. ‘But tell me nothing! I am only interested in the *inventions* these pages you bring me reveal. More than that, I do not care to know. A man like me is only immune from danger according to his usefulness; but if it were discovered that he knew too much –’ And Leonardo expressively slit his throat with his finger. ‘Well, that’s that,’ he continued. ‘I know you by now, Ezio, your visits are never simply social. Have a glass of this rather awful Veneto – give me Chianti any day – and there are some fishcakes somewhere or other, if you’re hungry.’

‘Have you completed your commission?’

‘The *Conte* is a patient man. *Salute!*’ Leonardo raised his glass.

‘Leo – does this machine of yours actually *work*?’ asked Ezio.

‘You mean, does it fly?’

‘Yes.’

Leonardo rubbed his chin. ‘Well, it’s still in the early stages. I mean, it’s nowhere near ready yet – but I think, in all modesty, that – yes! Of course it will work. God knows I’ve spent enough time on it! It’s an idea that just won’t let go of me!’

‘Leo – can I try it?’

Leonardo looked shocked. ‘Of course you can’t! Are you mad? It’s far too dangerous. For a start, we’d have to get it to the top of a tower to launch you…’

The following day, before dawn, but just as the first streaks of greyish pink were colouring the eastern horizon, Leonardo and his assistants, having dismantled the flying-machine in order to transport it, had reconstructed it on the flat high roof of the Ca’ Pexaro, the family mansion of Leonardo’s unsuspecting employer. Ezio was with them. Beneath them, the city slept. There were not even any guards on the roofs of the Palazzo Ducale, for this was the Hour of the Wolf, when vampires and spectres were most powerful. No one but madmen and scientists would venture forth at such a time.

‘It’s ready,’ said Leonardo. ‘And thank God the coast is clear. If anyone saw this thing they’d never believe their eyes – and if they knew it was my invention I’d be finished in this town.’

‘I’ll be quick,’ said Ezio.

‘Try not to break it,’ said Leonardo.

‘This is a test flight,’ said Ezio. ‘I’ll go easy. Just tell me again how this *bambina* works.’

‘Have you ever watched a bird in flight?’ asked Leonardo. ‘It’s not about being lighter than air, it’s about grace and balance! You must simply use your bodyweight to control your elevation and direction, and the wings will carry you.’ Leonardo’s face was very serious. He squeezed Ezio’s arm. ‘*Buona fortuna*, my friend. You are – I hope – about to make history.’

Leonardo’s assistants strapped Ezio carefully into position below the machine. The bat-like wings stretched out above him. He was secured face forwards in a tight leather cradle, though his arms and legs were free, and before him was a horizontal crossbar of wood, attached to the main wooden frame which held the wings aloft. ‘Remember what I told you! Side-to-side controls the rudder. To-and-fro controls the angle of the wings,’ Leonardo explained earnestly.

‘Thank you,’ said Ezio, breathing hard. He knew that if this didn’t work, in a moment he’d be taking the last leap of his life.

‘Go with God,’ said Leonardo.

‘See you later,’ said Ezio with a confidence he didn’t really feel. He balanced the contraption over him, settled, and took a run off the edge of the roof.

His stomach left him first, and then there was a feeling of wonderful exhilaration. Venice reeled beneath him as he tumbled and rolled, but then the machine started to tremble, and fall down the sky. It was only by keeping his head, and remembering Leonardo’s instructions regarding the use of the joystick, that Ezio was able to right the craft and guide it back – just – to the Pexaro palace roof. He landed the strange craft at a running pace – using all his strength and agility to keep it stable.

‘Christ Almighty, it *worked*!’ yelled Leonardo, careless of security for a moment, unravelling Ezio from the machine and hugging him frantically. ‘You wonderful man! You *flew*!’

‘Yes, by God, so I did,’ said Ezio, breathless. ‘But not as far as I need to go.’ And his eyes sought out the Doge’s Palace and the courtyard that was his goal. He was also thinking of how little time he had, if the murder of Mocenigo was to be averted.

Later, back in Leonardo’s workshop, Ezio and the artist-inventor gave the machine a careful overhaul. Leonardo had his blueprints laid out on a large trestle table.

‘Let me look over my plans here. Maybe I can find something, some way to extend the duration of the flight.’

They were interrupted by the hasty arrival of Antonio. ‘Ezio! I am so sorry to disturb you but this is important! My spies tell me that Silvio has obtained the poison they need, and he’s handed it over to Grimaldi.’

But just then Leonardo shouted in despair. ‘It’s no good! I’ve been over it and over it and it just won’t work! I don’t know how to extend the flight. Oh, bugger it!’ He swept papers angrily off the table. Some of them wafted into the large fireplace nearby, and as they burned, rose. Leonardo watched, his expression clearing, and at last a broad smile cleared the anger from his face. ‘My God!’ he cried, ‘*Eureka!* Of course! Genius!’

He snatched the papers that weren’t already burnt out of the fire and stamped the flames out. ‘Never give in to your temper,’ he advised them. ‘It can be terribly counter-productive.’

‘So what’s cured yours?’ asked Antonio.

‘Look!’ Leonardo said. ‘Did you not see the ashes rise? Heat lifts things up! How often have I seen eagles high in the air, not flapping their wings at all, and yet staying aloft! The principle is simple! All we have to do is apply it!’

He reached for a map of Venice and spread it out on the table. Leaning over it with a pencil, he marked out the distance between the Palazzo Pexaro and the

Palazzo Ducale, putting crosses at key points between the two buildings. ‘Antonio!’ he cried. ‘Can you get your people to build bonfires at each of the places I’ve marked, and light them in a close sequence?’

Antonio studied the map. ‘I think we could arrange that – but why?’

‘Do you not see? This is Ezio’s flight path! The fires will carry my flying machine and him all the way to his target! Heat rises!’

‘What about the guards?’said Ezio.

Antonio looked at him. ‘You’ll be flying that thing. For once, leave the guards to us. In any case,’ he added, ‘some of them at least will be busy elsewhere. My spies tell me there’s a curious shipment of coloured powder in little tubes which has just arrived from a country far away to the east called China. God knows what it is but it must be valuable, they’re taking such good care of it.’

‘Fireworks,’ said Leonardo to himself.

‘What?’

‘Nothing!’

*

Antonio’s men had the fires Leonardo had ordered built and ready by dusk. They had also cleared the areas around them of any watchmen or idle bystanders who might be inclined to warn the authorities of what was afoot. Leonardo’s assistants had meanwhile transported the flying-machine to the Pexaro roof once more, and Ezio, armed with his spring-blade and arm-guard, had taken up his position in it. Antonio stood nearby.

‘Rather you than me,’ he said.

‘It’s the only way to get into the palace. You said so yourself.’

‘I never dreamed this could actually happen, though. I still find it almost impossible to believe. If God had meant us to fly –’

‘Are you ready to give the signal to your men, Antonio?’ asked Leonardo.

‘Absolutely.’

‘Then do so now, and we’ll get Ezio airborne.’

Antonio walked to the edge of the roof and looked down. Then he took out a large red handkerchief and waved it. Far below they could see first one, then two, three, four and five huge bonfires leap into flame.

‘Excellent, Antonio. My congratulations.’ Leonardo turned to Ezio. ‘Now, remember what I told you. You must fly from fire to fire. The heat of each one as you pass over it should keep you in the air all the way to the Ducal Palace.’

‘And be careful,’ said Antonio. ‘There are archers posted on the roofs and they’ll certainly shoot as soon as they see you. They’ll think you’re some demon

from hell.’

‘I wish there was some way I could use my sword at the same time as flying this thing.’

‘Your feet are free,’ said Leonardo thoughtfully. ‘If you manage to steer close enough to the archers and avoid their arrows, you might be able to kick them off the rooftops.’

‘I’ll bear that in mind.’

‘And now you must go. Good luck!’

Ezio sailed off the roof into the night sky, setting a course for the first fire. He was beginning to lose height as he approached, but then, as he reached it, he felt the machine lift again. Leonardo’s theory worked! On he flew, and he could see the thieves tending the bonfires look up and cheer. But the thieves were not the only ones aware of him. Ezio could see Barbarigo archers posted on the cathedral roof and on the other buildings near the Doge’s Palace. He managed to manoeuvre the flying-machine out of the way of most of the arrows, though one or two thudded into its wooden frame, and he also managed to swoop low enough to knock a handful of bowmen off their perches. But as he approached the Palace itself, the Doge’s own guards opened fire and they were using fire-arrows. One caught in the starboard wing of the machine and it immediately burst into flames. It was all Ezio could do to keep on course, and he was losing height fast. He saw a pretty young noblewoman looking up and screaming something about the devil having come to claim her, but then he was past. He let go of the controls and fumbled with the harness buckles which held him in. At the last moment he wrenched himself free and leapt forwards and outwards, to land in a perfect crouch on an inner courtyard roof, past the grille which guarded the palace interior from all but the birds. Looking up, he saw the flying-machine crash into the campanile of St Mark’s and its wreckage fall to the square below, causing panic and pandemonium among the people there. Even the ducal archers’ attention was diverted, and Ezio took advantage of that to climb swiftly down and out of sight. As he did so, he saw Doge Mocenigo appear at a second-storey window.

‘*Ma che cazzo*?’ said the Doge. ‘What was that?’

Carlo Grimaldi appeared at his elbow. ‘Probably just some youths with firecrackers. Come, finish your wine.’

Hearing that, Ezio made his way via roofs and walls and, taking care to keep out of sight of the archers, to a spot just outside the open window. Looking in, he saw the Doge draining a goblet. He threw himself over the sill and into the room, exclaiming, ‘Stop, *Altezza*! Don’t drink – !’

The Doge looked at him in astonishment as Ezio realized he had arrived a moment too late. Grimaldi smiled wanly. ‘Not quite your usual accursed good timing, young Assassin! *Messer* Mocenigo will be leaving us shortly. He’s drunk enough poison to fell a bull.’

Mocenigo rounded on him. ‘What? What have you done?’

Grimaldi made a gesture of regret. ‘You should have listened to me.’

The Doge staggered and would have fallen if Ezio had not rushed forward to support him and guide him to a chair, where he sat down heavily.

‘Feel tired…’ said the Doge. ‘… Going dark…’

‘I am so sorry, *Altezza*,’ said Ezio helplessly.

‘About time you tasted failure,’ snarled Grimaldi at Ezio, before flinging open the door of the room and bellowing, ‘Guards! Guards! The Doge has been poisoned! I have the killer here!’

Ezio sprang across the room and grabbed Grimaldi by the collar, dragging him back into the room, banging the door shut and locking it. Seconds later he heard the guards running up and hammering on it. He turned to Grimaldi. ‘Failure, eh? Then I’d better do something to make up for it.’ He released his spring-blade.

Grimaldi smiled. ‘You can kill me,’ he said, ‘But you can never defeat the Templars.’

Ezio plunged the dagger into Grimaldi’s heart. ‘Peace be with you,’ he said, coldly.

‘Good,’ said a feeble voice behind him. Looking round, Ezio saw that the Doge, though deadly pale, was still alive.

‘I’ll fetch help – a doctor,’ he said.

‘No – it’s too late for that. But I shall die happier for seeing my assassin go before me into the dark. Thank you.’ Mocenigo was struggling for breath. ‘I’d long suspected he was a Templar but I was too weak, too trusting… But look in his wallet. Take his papers. I don’t doubt that you’ll find something among them to help your own cause, and avenge my death.’

Mocenigo was smiling as he spoke. Ezio watched as the smile froze on his lips, his eyes glazed, and his head lolled sideways. Ezio put a hand on the side of the Doge’s neck to ascertain that he was dead, that there was no pulse. Ezio drew his fingers over the dead man’s face to close his eyelids, muttered a few words of blessing, and hastily took and opened Grimaldi’s wallet. There, among a small sheaf of other documents, was another Codex page.

The guards continued to hammer at the door, and now it was beginning to give. Ezio ran to the window and looked down. The courtyard was alive with guards. He’d have to take his chances on the roof. Climbing out of the window, he started to scale the wall above him as arrows hissed around his head,

clattering against the stonework on either side of him. When he reached the roof he had to contend with more archers, but they were off guard and he was able to use the element of surprise to dispense with them. But he was confronted with another difficulty. The grille which had kept him out before now trapped him within! He ran up to it, and realized that it was designed only to keep people out – its spiked top curved *outwards* and downwards. If he could climb to the top, he could leap clear. Already he could hear the footfalls of many guards thundering up the stairs to the roof. Summoning all the strength his desperation could give him, he took a running jump and clambered to the top of the grille. The next moment he was safely on the other side of it and it was the guards who were trapped by it. They were too heavily armed to be able to scale it, and Ezio knew that in any case they lacked his agility. Running to the edge of the roof, he looked down, leapt across to the scaffolding erected along the cathedral wall, and shinned down it. Then he sped into St Mark's Square and lost himself in the crowd.

18

The death of the Doge on the same night that the bizarre bird-demon appeared in the sky caused a great stir in Venice which lasted many weeks. Leonardo's flying-machine had crashed into St Mark's Square, already a conflagration, and had burnt to ashes, as no one would dare approach the strange contraption. In the meantime, the new Doge, Marco Barbarigo, was duly elected and took office. He swore a solemn public oath to track down the young assassin who had avoided capture and arrest by the skin of his teeth, and who had murdered that noble servant of the state, Carlo Grimaldi, and probably the old Doge too. Barbarigo and Ducal guards were to be seen at every street corner and they also patrolled the canals day and night.

Ezio, on Antonio's advice, lay low at his headquarters, but he was boiling with a frustration that wasn't helped by the fact that Leonardo had temporarily left town in the entourage of his patron, the Conte de Pexaro. Even Rosa lacked the means to distract him.

But soon, one day not far into the new year, Antonio called him to his office, greeting him with a broad smile. 'Ezio! I have two pieces of good news for you. First of all, your friend Leonardo has returned. Secondly, it's *Carnevale*! Nearly everyone is wearing a mask and so you –' But Ezio was already halfway out of the room. 'Hey! Where are you off to?'

'To see Leonardo!'

'Well, come back soon – there's someone I want you to meet.'

'Who is it?'

Her name's Sister Teodora.'

'A nun?'

'You'll see!'

Ezio made his way through the streets with his hood up over his head, making his way unobtrusively between the groups of extravagantly dressed and masked men and women who thronged the streets and the canals. He was keenly aware of the clusters of guards on duty as well. Marco Barbarigo was no more concerned about Grimaldi's death than he was about the death of his predecessor, which he had helped to plan; and now that he had made a pious show of seeking out a culprit, he could let the matter drop with a good public conscience, and appear to scale down the costly public operation. But Ezio also knew that if the Doge could secretly trap and kill him, he would. As long as he was alive and could be a thorn in the Templars' side, they would count him among their bitterest enemies. He would have to remain constantly on the lookout.

He made his way to Leonardo's workshop successfully, however, and entered it unseen.

'It's good to see you again,' Leonardo greeted him. 'This time I thought you were dead for sure. I heard no more of you, then there was all that business over Mocenigo and Grimaldi, then my patron took it into his head to travel and insisted I went with him – to Milan, as it happens – and I never have the leisure to rebuild my flying-machine because the Venetian Navy finally want me to start designing stuff for them – it's all very vexing!' Then he smiled. 'But the main thing is, you are alive and well!'

'And the most wanted man in Venice!'

'Yes. A double murderer, and of two of the state's most prominent citizens.'

'You know better than to believe that.'

'You wouldn't be here if I did. You know you can trust me, Ezio, as you can everybody here. After all, we're the ones who flew you into the Palazzo Ducale.' Leonardo clapped his hands and an assistant appeared with wine. 'Luca, can you find a carnival mask for our friend here? Something tells me it might come in handy.'

'*Grazie, amico mio*. And I have something for you.' Ezio handed over the new Codex page.

'Excellent,' said Leonardo, recognizing it immediately. He cleared some space on the table near him, unrolled the parchment and started to examine it.

'Hmnn,' he said, frowning in concentration. 'This one does have the design for a new weapon, and it's quite complex. It looks as if it'll attach to your wrist once again, but this is no dagger.' He pored over the manuscript some more. 'I know what this is! It's a firearm, but on a miniature scale – as small as a humming-bird in fact.'

'That doesn't sound possible,' said Ezio.

‘Only one way to find out, and that’s to make it,’ said Leonardo. ‘Luckily these Venetian assistants of mine are expert engineers. We’ll get down to it straight away.’

‘What about your other work?’

‘Oh, that’ll keep,’ said Leonardo airily. ‘They all think I’m a genius and it does no harm to let them – in fact, it means they tend to leave me in peace!’

In a matter of days the gun was ready for Ezio to test. For its size, its range and power turned out to be quite extraordinary. Like the blades, it was designed to attach to the spring-mechanism which strapped to Ezio’s arm, and could be pushed back to conceal it, shooting out in an instant when required for use.

‘How can it be that I never thought of something like this myself?’ Leonardo said.

‘The bigger question,’ Ezio replied wonderingly, ‘is how the idea could have come to a man who lived hundreds of years ago.’

‘Well, however it came about, it’s a magnificent piece of machinery, and I hope it serves you well.’

‘I think this new toy comes at a most timely moment,’ said Ezio, earnestly.

‘I see,’ said Leonardo. ‘Well, the less I know about it the better, though I can hazard a guess that it may have something to do with the new Doge. I’m not much of a politician, but sometimes even I can smell skulduggery.’

Ezio nodded meaningfully.

‘Well, that’s something you’d better talk to Antonio about. And you’d better hang on to that mask – as long as it’s *Carnevale*, you should be safe on the streets. But remember – no weapons out there! Just keep it up your sleeve.’

‘I’m going to see Antonio now,’ Ezio told him. ‘There’s someone he wants me to meet – some nun called Sister Teodora, over in Dorsoduro.’

‘Ah! Sister Teodora!’ smiled Leonardo.

‘Do you know her?’

‘She’s a mutual friend of Antonio’s and mine. You’ll like her.’

‘Who is she, exactly?’

‘You’ll find out,’ grinned Leonardo.

Ezio made his way to the address Antonio had given him. The building certainly didn’t look like a convent. Once he’d knocked and been admitted, he was convinced that he’d come to the wrong place, for the room he found himself in reminded him more than anything of Paola’s salon in Florence. And the elegant young women who came and went were certainly no nuns. He was about to put his mask back on and go when he heard Antonio’s voice, and moments later the man himself appeared, leading on his arm an elegant and beautiful woman with full lips and sultry eyes, who was, indeed, dressed as a nun.

‘Ezio! There you are,’ said Antonio. He was slightly drunk. ‘Allow me to introduce… Sister Teodora. Teodora, meet the – how shall I put this? – most talented man in all Venice!’

‘Sister,’ said Ezio bowing. Then he looked at Antonio. ‘Am I missing something here? I’ve never really seen you as the religious type.’

Antonio laughed, but Sister Teodora, when she spoke, was surprisingly serious. ‘It all depends on how you view religion, Ezio. It’s not men’s souls alone that require solace.’

‘Have a drink, Ezio!’ said Antonio. ‘We must talk, but first, relax! You’re perfectly safe here. Have you met the girls yet? Anyone take your fancy? Don’t worry, I won’t tell Rosa. And you must tell me –’

Antonio was interrupted by a scream from one of the rooms that surrounded the salon. The door flew open to reveal a wild-eyed man wielding a knife. Behind him on the blood-soaked bed, a girl writhed in agony. ‘Stop him,’ she screamed. ‘He’s cut me and he’s stolen my money!’

With a furious roar the maniac grabbed another girl before she could react and held her close, his knife at her throat. ‘Let me out of here or I’ll carve this one up too,’ he bawled, pressing the tip of the knife so that a little bead of blood appeared on the girl’s neck. ‘I mean it!’

Antonio, instantly sober, stared from Teodora to Ezio. Teodora herself was looking at Ezio. ‘Well, Ezio,’ she said with a coolness that took him aback, ‘now’s the chance to impress me.’

The maniac was making his way across the salon to the door, where a small knot of girls was standing. As he reached it, he growled at them, ‘Open it!’ But they seemed rooted to the spot with fear. ‘Open the sodding door or she gets it!’ He dug the knife a little further into the girl’s throat. Blood began to flood from her neck.

‘Let her go!’ commanded Ezio.

The man swung round to face him, an ugly expression on his face. ‘And who are you? Some kind of *benefattore del cazzo*? Don’t make me finish her off!’

Ezio looked from the man to the door. The girl in his arms had fainted, a dead weight. Ezio could see the man hesitate, but any moment now he would have to let her go. He readied himself. It would be hard, the other women were close; he’d have to pick the precise moment and then act fast, and he knew he had very little experience of his new weapon. ‘Open the door,’ he said firmly to one of the terrified prostitutes in the group.

As she turned to do so, the madman let the bleeding girl fall to the ground. As he prepared to rush out into the street, he took his attention off Ezio for a second, and in that second Ezio released his little pistol and fired.

There was a snapping report and a burst of flame followed by a puff of smoke seemed to shoot out from between the fingers of Ezio's right hand. The maniac, a surprised expression still on his face, fell to his knees, a neat little hole in the middle of his forehead and some of his brains spattered on the doorpost behind him. The girls screamed and moved hastily away from him as he slowly toppled forward. Teodora shouted orders, and attendants hurried to succour the two wounded girls, but they were too late for the one in the bedroom, as she had bled to death.

'You have our gratitude, Ezio,' said Teodora, once order had been restored.

'I was too late to save her.'

'You saved the others. He might have slaughtered more if you hadn't been here to stop him.'

'What sorcery did you use to bring him down?' asked an awe-struck Antonio.

'No sorcery. Just a secret. A grown-up cousin of the throwing-knife.'

'Well, I can see that it's going to come in handy. Our new Doge is scared stiff. He surrounds himself with guards and he never leaves the palazzo.' Antonio paused. 'I imagine that Marco Barbarigo is next on your list?'

'He is as big an enemy as his cousin Emilio was.'

'We will help you,' said Teodora, joining them. 'And our chance presents itself soon. The Doge is throwing a massive party for *Carnevale* and he will have to leave the palazzo for that. No expense has been spared, as he wants to buy the people's favour even if he cannot earn it. According to my spies, he has even ordered fireworks from China!'

'This is why I asked you here today,' Antonio explained to Ezio. 'Sister Teodora is one of us, and she has her finger on the very pulse of Venice.'

'How do I get invited to this party?' Ezio asked her.

'It isn't easy,' she replied. 'You need a golden mask to get you in.'

'Well, it can't be so hard to lay hands on one of those.'

'Not so fast – each mask *is* an invitation, and each is numbered.' But then Teodora smiled. 'Never mind, I have an idea. I think it's possible that we might *win* you a mask. Come, walk with me.' She led him away from the others to a quiet little courtyard at the rear of the building, where a fountain played in an ornamental pool.

'They are holding some special carnival games which are open to all tomorrow. There are four events, and the winner will be awarded a golden mask and will be an honorary guest at the party. You must win it, Ezio, for access to the party gives you access to Marco Barbarigo.' She looked at him. 'When you go, I advise you to take that little spitfire of yours with you, for you won't get close enough to knife him.'

‘May I ask you a question?’

‘You can try. I cannot guarantee an answer.’

‘I am curious. You wear the habit of a nun, and yet clearly you are no such thing.’

‘How do you know that? I assure you, my son, that I am married to the Lord.’

‘But I don’t understand. You are also a courtesan. Indeed, you run a bordello.’

Teodora smiled. ‘I see no contradiction. How I choose to practise my faith, what I choose to do with my body – these are my choices and I am free to make them.’ She paused in thought for a moment. ‘Look,’ she continued. ‘Like so many young women, I was drawn to the Church, but gradually I became disillusioned with the so-called believers in this city. Men only hold God as an idea in their heads, and not in the depths of their hearts and their bodies. Do you see what I am getting at, Ezio? Men must know how to love in order to attain salvation. My girls and I provide that knowledge to our congregation. Of course, no imaginable sect of the Church would agree with me, so I was obliged to create my own. It may not be traditional, but it works, and men’s hearts grow firmer in my care.’

‘Among other things, I imagine.’

‘You are cynical, Ezio.’ She extended her hand to him. ‘Come back tomorrow and we will see about these games. Take care of yourself in the meantime and don’t forget your mask. I know you can take care of yourself, but our enemies are still out to get you.’

There were some small adjustments Ezio wanted on his new gun, so he returned to Leonardo’s workshop on his way back to the Thieves’ Guild headquarters.

‘I am glad to see you again, Ezio.’

‘You were right about Sister Teodora, Leonardo. Truly a Freethinker.’

‘She would get into trouble with the Church if she weren’t so well protected; but she has some powerful admirers.’

‘I can imagine.’ But Ezio noticed that Leonardo was slightly abstracted, and looking at him strangely. ‘What is it, Leo?’

‘Perhaps it would be better not to tell you, but if you found out by accident it would be worse. Look, Ezio, Cristina Calfucci is in Venice with her husband for *Carnevale*. Of course she’s Cristina d’Arzenta now.’

‘Where is she staying?’

‘She and Manfredo are the guests of my patron. That is how I know.’

‘I must see her!’

‘Ezio – are you sure that’s such a good idea?’

‘I’ll collect the gun in the morning. I’ll need it by then, I’m afraid – I have some urgent business to attend to.’

‘Ezio, I wouldn’t go out unarmed.’

‘I still have my Codex blades.’

Heart pumping, Ezio made his way to the Palazzo Pexaro, via the office of a public scribe whom he paid to write a short note, which read:

> *Cristina my darling*
> *I must meet you alone and away from our hosts this evening at the nineteenth hour. I will await you at the Sign of the Sundial in the Rio Terra degli Ognisanti –*

– and he had it signed, ‘Manfredo’. Then he delivered it to the *Conte*’s palazzo, and waited.

It had been a long shot, but it worked. She soon emerged with only a maidservant to chaperone her, and hurried in the direction of Dorsoduro. He followed her. When she arrived at the appointed spot and her chaperone had retired to a discreet distance, he stepped forward. Both of them were wearing their carnival masks, but he could tell that she was as beautiful as ever. He could not help himself. He took her in his arms and kissed her long and tenderly.

Finally she broke free and, taking off her mask, she looked at him uncomprehendingly. Then, before he could stop her, she had reached up and removed his own mask.

‘Ezio!’

‘Forgive me, Cristina, I –’ He noticed she no longer wore his pendant. Of course not.

‘What the hell are you doing here? How dare you kiss me like that?’

‘Cristina, it’s all right…’

‘All *right*? I haven’t seen or heard from you in eight *years*!’

‘I was just afraid you wouldn’t come at all if I didn’t use a little subterfuge.’

‘You’re quite right – of course I wouldn’t have come! I seem to remember that the last time we met you kissed me in the street and then, as cool as a cucumber, saved my fiancé’s life and left me to marry him.’

‘It was the right thing to do. He loved you, and I –’

‘Who cares what he wanted? I loved *you*!’

Ezio didn’t know what to say. He felt as if the world had fallen away from him.

‘Don’t seek me out again, Ezio,’ continued Cristina, tears in her eyes. ‘I can’t bear it, and you clearly have another life now.’

‘Cristina –’

‘There was a time when you would only have had to crook your finger, and I –’ She interrupted herself. ‘Goodbye, Ezio.’

He watched helplessly as she walked away, rejoined her companion, and disappeared round a corner of the street. She had not looked back.

Cursing himself and his fate, Ezio made his way back to the Thieves' headquarters.

The following day found him in a mood of grim determination. He collected his gun from Leonardo, thanked him, and retrieved the Codex page, hoping that in time he would be able to get it and the other, taken from Emilio, back to his uncle Mario. Then he made his way back to Teodora's house. From there, she conducted him to the Campo di San Polo, where the games were to take place. In the centre of the square a rostrum had been erected, and on it two or three officials sat at a desk, taking the competitors' names. Among the people around, Ezio noticed the unhealthy, gaunt figure of Silvio Barbarigo. With him he was surprised to see the enormous bodyguard, Dante.

'You'll be up against him,' Teodora was saying. 'Think you can take him on?'

'If I have to.'

Finally, when all the competitors' names had been taken (Ezio gave a false one), a tall man in a bright red cloak took his place on the rostrum. He was the Master of Ceremonies.

There were four games in all. The contestants would vie with one another in each, and at the end an overall winner would be decided on by a panel of judges. Luckily for Ezio, many of the competitors, in the spirit of Carnival, elected to keep their masks on.

The first game was a foot-race, which Ezio won easily, to the intense chagrin of Silvio and Dante. The second, more complicated, involved a tactical battle of wills in which the contestants had to vie with each other as they tried to capture from one another emblematic flags which each had been provided with.

In this game, too, Ezio was pronounced the winner, but he felt uneasy as he saw the expressions on the faces of Dante and Silvio.

'The third contest,' announced the Master of Ceremonies, 'combines elements of the first two and adds new ones of its own. This time, you will have to use speed and skill, but also charisma and charm!' He spread his arms wide, to indicate a number of fashionably dressed women about the square, who giggled prettily as he did so. 'A number of our ladies have volunteered to help us with this one,' continued the Master of Ceremonies. 'Some are here in the square. Others are walking in the streets around. You may even find some in gondolas. Now, you will recognize these ladies by the ribbons they wear in their hair. Your job, honoured competitors, is to collect as many ribbons as you can by the time my hour-glass runs out. We'll ring the church bell when your time is up, but I

think I can safely say that however fortune favours you, this will be the most enjoyable event of the day! The man who returns with the most ribbons will be the winner, and one step closer to gaining the Golden Mask. But remember, if there is no outright victor in these games, the judges will decide which lucky one of you will attend the Doge's party! And now – Begin!'

The time passed, as the Master of Ceremonies had promised, quickly and enjoyably. The bell of San Polo rang out at a sign from him as the last sands trickled from the upper to the lower chamber of the glass, and the competitors took up their positions back in the square, handing their ribbons over to the adjudicators, some smiling, others blushing. Only Dante remained stony-faced, though his face grew red with anger when the count had been made and it was – once again – Ezio's arm that the Master of Ceremonies held high.

'Well, my mysterious young man, you are in luck today,' the Master of Ceremonies said. 'Let's hope your good fortune doesn't desert you at the last hurdle.' He turned to address the crowd in general, while the rostrum was cleared and ropes set up round it to convert it into a boxing ring. 'The last contest, ladies and gentlemen, is a complete contrast. It concerns itself only with brute strength. The competitors will fight each other, until all but the last two are eliminated. The last two will fight until one of them is knocked out. And then comes the moment you've all been waiting for! The *overall* winner of the Golden Mask will be announced, but be careful how you place your bets – there's plenty of time for upsets and surprises yet!'

It was in this last game that Dante excelled, but Ezio, using different skills and light on his feet, managed to make the final pair, confronting the giant bodyguard. The man swung at Ezio with fists like piledrivers, but Ezio was agile enough to ensure that no seriously heavy punches landed and he was able to get some meaningful left uppercuts and right hooks in himself.

There were no breaks between rounds in this last bout, and after a time Ezio could see that Dante was tiring. But he also, out of the corner of his eye, noticed that Silvio Barbarigo was speaking urgently to the Master of Ceremonies and the panel of judges who had gathered at a table under a canopy not far from the ring. He thought he saw a fat leather purse change hands, which the Master of Ceremonies quickly pocketed, but he couldn't be sure, as he had to return his attention to his opponent, who, angry now, was coming at him with flailing arms. Ezio ducked and landed two quick jabs to Dante's chin and body, and at last the big man went over. Ezio stood over him and Dante glowered up. 'This isn't over yet,' he growled, but he was finding it hard to get up.

Ezio looked over at the Master of Ceremonies, lifting his arm in appeal, but the man's face was stony. 'Are we sure all the competitors have been

eliminated?' the Master of Ceremonies called. '*All* of them? We cannot announce a winner until we are *sure*!'

There was a murmur in the crowd as two grim-looking men detached themselves from it and clambered into the ring. Ezio looked towards the judges but they had averted their gaze. The men were closing in on him and Ezio now saw that each had a stubby little knife, almost invisible, clutched in his paw.

'So that's how it's going to be, eh?' he said to them. 'No holds barred, then.'

He danced out of the way as the fallen Dante tried to pull him off balance by grabbing his ankles, then leapt in the air to kick one of his new opponents in the face. The man spat out teeth and reeled away. Ezio came down and stamped hard on the second man's left foot, crushing the instep. Then he punched him viciously in the stomach and, as he doubled up, brought his knee into hard contact with the man's descending chin. Howling with pain, the man went over. He had bitten through his tongue, and blood gushed through his lips.

Without looking back, Ezio vaulted out of the ring and confronted the Master of Ceremonies and the sheepish-looking judges. The crowd behind him cheered.

'I think we have a winner,' Ezio told the Master of Ceremonies. The man exchanged glances with the judges and with Silvio Barbarigo, who was standing close by. The Master of Ceremonies climbed into the ring, avoiding the blood as best he could, and addressed the crowd.

'Ladies and gentlemen!' he announced after clearing his throat a little nervously. 'I think you'll all agree that we've enjoyed a hard and fairly fought battle today.'

The crowd cheered.

'And on such an occasion it's hard to choose a real winner –'

The crowd looked puzzled. Ezio exchanged glances with Teodora, who was standing on its fringe.

'It's been a hard job for the judges and myself,' continued the Master of Ceremonies, sweating slightly and mopping his brow, but a winner there has to be, and, on aggregate, mind, we have picked one.' Here he stooped and with difficulty raised Dante to a sitting position. 'Ladies and gentlemen – I give you the winner of the Golden Mask – Signore Dante Moro!'

The crowd hissed and booed, yelling their disapproval, and the Master of Ceremonies, together with the judges, had to beat a hasty retreat as the bystanders began to pelt them with any rubbish they could lay their hands on. Ezio hurried across to Teodora and the two of them watched as Silvio, a twisted smile on his livid face, helped Dante off the rostrum and bundled him away down a side-alley.

19

Back at Teodora's 'convent', Ezio struggled to contain himself as Teodora herself and Antonio watched him with concern.

'I saw Silvio bribe the Master of Ceremonies,' said Teodora. 'And no doubt he lined the judges' pockets too. There was nothing I could do.'

Antonio laughed derisively and Ezio cast him an irritable look.

'It's easy to see why Silvio was so determined to get their man to win the Golden Mask,' Teodora went on. 'They're still on the alert and they don't want to take any chances with Doge Marco.' She looked at Ezio. 'They won't rest until you are dead.'

'Then they'll have a lot of sleepless nights.'

'We must think. The party's tomorrow.'

'I'll find a way of shadowing Dante to the party,' decided Ezio. 'I'll get the mask off him somehow, and –'

'How?' Antonio wanted to know. 'By killing the poor *stronzo*?'

Ezio turned on him angrily. 'Do you have a better idea? You know what's at stake!'

Antonio held up his hands, deprecatingly. 'Look, Ezio – if you kill him, they'll cancel the party, and Marco will retreat back into the palazzo. We'll have wasted our time – again! No, the thing to do is steal the mask, quietly.'

'My girls can help,' put in Teodora. 'Plenty of them will be going to the party themselves – as entertainers! They can distract Dante while you acquire the mask. And once you're there, have no fear. I will be there too.'

Ezio nodded reluctantly. He didn't like being told what to do, but in this instance he knew that Antonio and Teodora were right. '*Va bene*,' he said.

The following day, as the sun was setting, Ezio made sure he was in place near where Dante would pass by on the way to the party. Several of Teodora's girls loitered nearby. At last the big man appeared. He'd gone to some lengths with his clothes, which were expensive but flashy. The Golden Mask hung at his belt. As soon as they saw him the girls cooed and waved, moving up to either side of him, two of them linking arms with him, making sure the mask swung behind him, and walking him to the large, cordoned-off area by the Molo where the party was taking place, and had, indeed, already begun. Timing his action precisely, Ezio chose the last possible minute to cut the mask free of Dante's belt. He snatched it away and ducked ahead of Dante, to appear with it before the guardsmen who were controlling entrance to the party. Seeing it, they let Ezio in, but when, a few moments later, Dante appeared, and reached behind him to put the mask on, he found that it had gone. The girls who'd escorted him had melted into the crowd and put on their own masks, so he would not recognize them.

Dante was still arguing with the guards at the gate, who had their inflexible orders, as Ezio made his way through the revellers to make contact with Teodora. She greeted him warmly. 'You made it! Congratulations! Now, listen. Marco remains very cautious indeed. He's staying on his boat, the Ducal Bucintoro, on the water just off the Molo. You won't be able to get all that close to him, but you should find the best vantage-point for your attack.' She turned to summon three or four of her courtesans. 'These girls will help cover your movements as you make your way through the party.'

Ezio set off, but as the girls, radiant in shimmering silver and red satins and silks, moved through the sea of guests, his attention was taken by a tall, dignified man in his mid-sixties, with clear, intelligent eyes and a white spade beard, who was talking to a Venetian noble of similar age. Both wore small masks which covered little of the face, and Ezio recognized the first of them as Agostino Barbarigo, the younger brother of Marco. Agostino might have a lot to do with the fate of Venice if anything untoward should happen to his brother, and Ezio thought it expedient to manoeuvre himself into a position from which he could overhear the man's conversation.

As Ezio edged up, Agostino was laughing gently. 'Honestly, my brother embarrasses himself with this display.'

'You have no right to speak of him that way,' replied the noble. 'He is the Doge!'

'Yes, yes. He is the Doge,' replied Agostino, stroking his beard.

'This is his Party. His *Carnevale*, and he'll spend his money as he sees fit.'

‘He’s the Doge in name only,’ Agostino said rather more sharply. ‘And it’s Venetian money that he’s spending, not his own.’ He lowered his voice. ‘There are larger things at stake, and you know it.’

‘Marco was the man chosen to lead. It’s true your father may have thought that he’d never amount to much, and so transferred his political ambitions to you, but that hardly matters now, does it, given how things stand?’

‘I never *wanted* to be Doge –’

‘Then I congratulate you on your success,’ said the nobleman, coldly.

‘Look,’ said Agostino, keeping his temper. ‘Power is more than wealth. Does my brother truly believe he was chosen for any other reason than his riches?’

‘He was chosen for his wisdom and his leadership!’

They were interrupted by the beginning of the firework display. Agostino watched it for a moment, then said, ‘And this is what he does with such wisdom? Offer a light show? He hides away in the Ducal Palace while the city comes apart at the seams, and then thinks some expensive explosions will make people forget all their problems.’

The noble made a dismissive gesture. ‘The people love the spectacle. It’s human nature. You’ll see…’

But at that moment Ezio spotted the burly figure of Dante, in the company of a posse of guards, barging through the party, doubtless looking for him. He continued to make his way to an unexposed spot from where he might gain access to the Doge if ever he left the Bucintoro, moored a few yards out from the quay.

There was a fanfare and for now the fireworks ceased. The people fell silent, then broke into applause as Marco came to the portside of his state barge to address them, and a page introduced him: ‘*Signore e signori!* I present to you the beloved Doge of *Venezia*!’

Marco began his address: ‘*Benvenuti!* Welcome, my friends, to the grandest social event of the season! In peace or at war, in times of prosperity or paucity, *Venezia* will always have *Carnevale*!…’

As the Doge continued to speak, Teodora rejoined Ezio.

‘It’s too far,’ Ezio told her. ‘And he’s not going to leave the boat. So I’ll have to swim out there. *Merda*!’

‘I wouldn’t try it,’ said Teodora in hushed tones. ‘You’d be spotted right away.’

‘Then I’ll have to fight my way out th—’

‘Wait!’

The Doge was continuing. ‘Tonight, we celebrate what makes us great. How brightly our lights shine over the world!’ He spread his arms, and there was

another short firework display. The crowd cheered and roared their approval.

'That's it!' said Teodora. 'Use your *pistola*! The one you stopped the murderer with in my bordello. Use the sound of the fireworks when they start again to cover the noise of your gunshot. Time it right, and you'll walk out of here unnoticed.'

Ezio looked at her. 'I like the way you think, Sister.'

'You'll just have to be very careful how you aim. You'll only get one chance.' She squeezed his arm. '*Buona fortuna*, my son. I'll be waiting for you back at the bordello.'

She vanished among the partygoers, among whom Ezio could also see Dante and his goons still searching for him. Silent as a wraith, he made his way to a point on the quay as close as he dared get to the spot where Marco was standing on the barge. Fortunately, his resplendent robes, bathed in the lights of the party, made him an excellent target.

The Doge's speech continued, and Ezio used it to prepare himself, listening carefully for the resumption of the fireworks. His timing would have to be accurate if he was to get his shot off undetected.

'We all know we have come through troubled times,' Marco was saying. 'But we have come through them together, and *Venezia* stands a stronger city for it… Transitions of power are difficult for all, but we have weathered the shift with grace and tranquillity. It is no easy thing to lose a Doge in the prime of life – and it is frustrating to see our dear brother Mocenigo's assassin still roam free and unpunished. However, we may comfort ourselves with the thought that many of us were beginning to grow uncomfortable with my predecessor's policies, to feel unsafe, and to doubt the road he was guiding us down.' Several voices in the crowd were raised in agreement, and Marco, smiling, held up his hands for silence. 'Well, my friends, I can tell you that I have found the right road for us again! I can see down it, and I know where we are going! It's a beautiful place, and we are going there together! The future I see for *Venezia* is a future of strength, a future of wealth. We will build a fleet so strong that our enemies will fear us as never before! And we will expand our trade routes across the seas and bring home spices and treasures undreamed of since Marco Polo's time!' Marco's eyes glittered as his voice took on a minatory tone. 'And I say this to those who stand against us: be careful which side of the line you choose, because either you are with us or you are on the side of evil. And we will harbour no enemies here! We will hunt you down, we will root you out, we will destroy you!' He raised his hands again and declaimed: 'And *Venezia* shall always stand – the brightest jewel in all civilization!'

As he let his arms fall in triumph, a mighty display of fireworks went up – a grand finale which turned night into day. The noise of the explosions was deafening – Ezio's little lethal gunshot was quite lost in it. And he was well on his way out through the crowd before the people in it had had time to react to the sight of Marco Barbarigo, one of the shortest-reigning doges in Venetian history, stagger, clutching at his heart, and falling dead on the deck of the Ducal Barge. '*Requiescat in pace*,' Ezio muttered to himself as he went.

But once the news was out, it travelled fast, and reached the brothel before Ezio did. He was greeted with cries of admiration from Teodora and her courtesans.

'You must be exhausted,' said Teodora, taking his arm and leading him away from the others towards an inner room. 'Come, relax!'

But first Antonio offered his congratulations. 'The saviour of Venice!' he exclaimed. 'What can I say? Perhaps it was wrong of me to doubt so readily. Now at least we'll have a chance to see where the pieces fall…'

'Enough of that now,' said Teodora. 'Come, Ezio. You've worked hard, my son. I feel your tired body is in need of comfort and succour.'

Ezio was quick to catch her meaning, and played along. 'It is true, Sister. I have such aches and pains that I may need a great deal of comfort and succour. I hope you are up to it.'

'Oh,' grinned Teodora, 'I don't intend to ease your pain single-handed! Girls!'

A gaggle of courtesans slipped smilingly past Ezio into the inner room, at the centre of which he could see a truly massive bed, by whose side was a singular contraption like a couch, but with pulleys and belts, and chains. It reminded him of something out of Leonardo's workshop, but he couldn't imagine what possible use it might be put to.

He exchanged a long look with Teodora and followed her into the bedroom, closing the door firmly behind him.

A couple of days later Ezio was standing on the Rialto Bridge, relaxed and refreshed, and watching the crowds go by. He was just considering leaving to go and drink a couple of glasses of Veneto before the *ora di pranzo*, when he saw a man he recognized hurrying towards him – one of Antonio's messengers.

'Ezio, Ezio,' the man said as he came up. '*Ser* Antonio wishes to see you – it's a matter of importance.'

'Then we'll go immediately,' said Ezio, following him off the bridge.

They found Antonio in his office in the company – to Ezio's surprise – of Agostino Barbarigo. Antonio made the introductions.

'It is an honour to meet you, sir. I am sorry for the loss of your brother.'

Agostino waved a hand. ‘I appreciate your sympathy, but to be frank my brother was a fool and completely under the control of the Borgia faction in Rome – something I would not wish on Venice ever. Luckily, some public-spirited person has averted that danger by assassinating him. In a curiously original way… There will be inquiries, of course, but I am at a loss personally to see where they will lead…’

‘*Messer* Agostino is shortly to be elected Doge,’ put in Antonio. ‘It is good news for Venice.’

‘The Council of Forty-One has worked fast this time,’ said Ezio, drily.

‘I think they have learnt the error of their ways,’ replied Agostino with a wry smile. ‘But I do not wish to be Doge in name only, as my brother was. Which brings us to the business in hand. Our ghastly cousin Silvio has occupied the Arsenal – the military quarter of town – and garrisoned it with two hundred mercenaries!’

‘But when you are Doge, can’t you command them to stand down?’ asked Ezio.

‘It would be nice to think so,’ said Agostino, ‘but my brother’s extravagances have depleted the city’s resources, and we will be hard put to it to withstand a determined force who have control of the Arsenal. And without the Arsenal, I have no real control of Venice, Doge or no Doge!’

‘Then,’ said Ezio. ‘We must raise a determined force of our own.’

‘Well said!’ Antonio beamed. ‘And I think I have just the man for the job. Have you heard of Bartolomeo d’Alviano?’

‘Of course. The *condottiero* who used to serve the Papal States! He’s turned against them, I know.’

‘And just now he’s based here. He has little love for Silvio, who, as you know, is also in Cardinal Borgia’s pocket,’ said Agostino. ‘Bartolomeo’s based on San Pietro, east of the Arsenal.’

‘I’ll go and see him.’

‘Before you do that, Ezio,’ said Antonio, ‘*Messer* Agostino has something for you.’

From his robes Agostino withdrew a rolled, ancient vellum scroll, with a heavy black seal, broken, hanging from a tattered red ribbon. ‘My brother had it among his papers. Antonio thought it might interest you. Consider it a payment for… services rendered.’

Ezio took it. He knew immediately what it was. ‘Thank you, Signore. I am sure this will be of great help in the battle which will surely come.’

Pausing only to arm himself, Ezio wasted no time in making his way to Leonardo's workshop, where he was surprised to find his friend in the process of packing up.

'Where are you off to now?' asked Ezio.

'Back to Milan. I was going to send you a message before I left, of course. And to send you a packet of bullets for your little gun.'

'Well, I am very glad I've caught you. Look, I have another Codex page!'

'Excellent. I am most interested in seeing those. Come in. My servant Luca and the others can carry on with this. I've got them quite well trained by now. Pity I can't take them all with me.'

'What are you going to do in Milan?'

'Lodovico Sforza made me an offer I couldn't refuse.'

'But what about your projects here?'

'The navy's had to cancel. No money for new projects. Apparently the last Doge ran through most of it. I could have done him fireworks, no need to have gone to all the expense of sending off to China for them. Never mind, Venice is still at peace with the Turks, and they've told me I'm welcome to come back – in fact, I think they'd like me to. Meanwhile I'm leaving Luca behind – he'd be a fish out of water away from Venice – with a few basic designs to get them started. And as for the Conte, he's happy with his family portraits – though personally I think they could do with more work.' Leonardo started to unroll the vellum sheet. 'Now, let's have a look at this.'

'Promise you'll let me know when you return here.'

'I promise, my friend. And you – keep me posted on your movements if you can.'

'I will.'

'Now…' Leonardo spread the Codex page out and examined it. 'There's something here that looks like a blueprint for the double-bladed knife that went with your metal guard-bracer, but it's incomplete and may be an earlier draft of the design. The rest can only be significant in connection with the other pages – look, there are more map-like markings and some kind of picture that puts me in mind of those complex knot-patterns I used to doodle when I had any time to think for myself!' Leonardo rolled up the page again and looked at Ezio. 'I'd put this in a safe place with the other two pages you've shown me here in Venice. They're all clearly of great significance.'

'Actually, Leo, if you're going to Milan I wonder if I might ask you a favour?'

'Fire away.'

'When you get to Padua, would you please organize a trustworthy courier to take these three pages to my Uncle Mario in Monteriggioni? He's an…

antiquarian… and I know he'll find them interesting. But I need someone I can depend on to do this for me.'

Leonardo gave him the ghost of a smile. If Ezio hadn't been so preoccupied, he might almost have thought it *knowing*. 'I'm sending my stuff straight on to Milan, but as for myself I'm paying a flying visit – to coin a phrase – to Florence first to check on Agniolo and Innocento, so I'll be your courier as far as there, and I'll send Agniolo on to Monteriggioni with them, have no fear.'

'That is better than I could have hoped for.' Ezio grasped his hand. 'You are a good and wonderful friend, Leo.'

'I certainly hope so, Ezio. Occasionally I think you could do with someone truly to look out for you.' He paused. 'And I wish you well in your work. I hope one day you will be able to bring it to a conclusion, and find rest.'

A distant look came into Ezio's steel-grey eyes, but he didn't reply except to say, 'You've reminded me – I have another errand to run. I'll send one of my host's men over with the other two Codex pages. And now, for the moment, *addio*!'

20

The quickest way to reach San Pietro from Leonardo’s workshop was by taking the ferry or hiring a boat from the Fondamenta Nuova and sailing east from the north shores of the city. To his surprise Ezio found it hard to get anyone to take him there. The regular ferries had been suspended, and it was only by digging deep into his pockets that he managed to persuade a pair of young gondoliers to make the journey.

‘What’s the problem?’ he asked them.

‘Word is, there’s been some bad fighting down there,’ said the aft oarsman, straining against choppy water. ‘Seems that it’s died down now, just a local feud. But the ferries aren’t risking starting up again just yet. We’ll drop you on the north foreshore. Just keep an eye out for yourself.’

They did as they had promised. Ezio soon found himself alone, plodding up a muddy bank to the brick retaining wall, from where he could see the spire of the church of San Pietro di Castello a short way off. What he could also see was several plumes of smoke rising from a group of low brick buildings some distance south-east of the church. They were Bartolomeo’s barracks. His heart pounding, Ezio hastened in their direction.

The first thing that struck him was the silence. Then, as he drew nearer, he began to see dead bodies strewn around, some of the men wearing the blazon of Silvio Barbarigo, others a device he did not recognize. Finally he came upon a sergeant, badly wounded but still alive, who had managed to prop himself up against a low wall.

‘Please… help me,’ said the sergeant when Ezio approached.

Ezio searched around quickly and located the well, from which he drew water, praying that the attackers had not poisoned it, though it looked clean and clear

enough. He poured some into a beaker he'd found and put it gently to the man's lips, then moistened a cloth and wiped the blood from his face.

'Thank you, friend,' said the sergeant. Ezio noticed that he wore the unfamiliar badge, and guessed that it must be Bartolomeo's. Evidently Bartolomeo's troops had been worsted by Silvio's.

'It was a surprise attack,' the sergeant confirmed. 'Some whore of Bartolomeo's betrayed us.'

'Where have they gone now?'

'The Inquisitor's men? Back to the Arsenal. They've established a base there, just before the new Doge could take control. Silvio hates his cousin Agostino because he isn't part of whatever plot the Inquisitor's involved in.' The man coughed blood, but endeavoured to continue. 'Took our Captain prisoner. Carried him off with them. Funny really, *we* were just planning to attack *them*. Bartolomeo was simply waiting for… a messenger from the city.'

'Where are the rest of your men now?'

The sergeant tried to look around. 'Those that weren't killed or taken prisoner scattered, tried to save themselves. They'll be lying low in Venice and on the islands in the lagoon. But they'll need someone to unite behind. They'll be waiting for word of the Captain.'

'And he's a prisoner of Silvio?'

'Yes. He…' But the unfortunate sergeant here started to fight for breath. His struggle ended as his mouth opened and a shower of blood streamed from it, drenching the grass for three yards in front of him. But the time the flow had stopped, the man's eyes were staring sightlessly in the direction of the lagoon.

Ezio closed them for him, and crossed his arms on his chest. '*Requiescat in pace*,' he said, solemnly.

Then he hitched his sword-belt tighter – he had also strapped the guard-brace to his left forearm, but had left off the double-bladed dagger attachment. To his right forearm he had attached the poison-blade, always so useful when faced with huge odds. The pistol, most useful when a single, certain target was in view, as it had to be reloaded after each firing, he kept in his belt-pouch with powder and shot, and the original spring-blade as back-up. He pulled up his hood, and headed for the wooden bridge which connected San Pietro to Castello. From there he made his way unobtrusively but quickly down the main street in the direction of the Arsenal. He noticed that the people around him were subdued, though they went about their daily work as usual. It would take more than a local war to stop the business of Venice entirely, though of course few of the ordinary citizens of Castello could know just how important for their city the outcome of this conflict was.

Ezio didn’t know then that it would be a conflict which would drag on for many, many months, indeed, into the following year. He thought of Cristina, of his mother Maria and his sister Claudia. And he felt himself to be homeless, and getting older. But there was the Creed to be served and upheld, and that was more important than anything else. No one, perhaps, would ever know that their world had been saved from the dominion of the Templars by the select Order of Assassins, which had pledged itself to opposing their evil hegemony.

His first task was clearly to locate and, if possible, free Bartolomeo d’Alviano, but getting into the Arsenal would be hard. Surrounded by high brick fortified walls, and containing a warren of buildings and shipyards, it stood at the eastern limit of the main city, and it was heavily guarded by Silvio’s private army, whose numbers seemed to exceed the two hundred mercenaries Agostino Barbarigo had told him of. Ezio, passing the architect Gamballo’s recently built main gate, wandered round the outside perimeters of the buildings as far as they were accessible by land, until he came to a heavy door with a wicket gate built into it, and, observing from a distance, saw that this unobtrusive entry was used by guards on the outside when they changed shift. He had to wait unobtrusively for four hours, but at the next shift change he was ready. It was baking hot in the late afternoon sun, the atmosphere was humid, and everyone except Ezio was torpid. He watched as the relief soldiers marched out through the gate, which had only one guard, and then followed the mercenaries coming off shift, bringing up the rear and blending in as best he could. Once the last soldier was through, he cut the throat of the guard posted at the gate and slipped through it himself before anyone had noticed what was happening. As had happened years ago at San Gimignano, Silvio’s force here, big as it was, wasn’t sufficient to cover the entire area it guarded. It was, after all, the city’s military focal point. No wonder Agostino couldn’t wield any real power without control of it.

Once inside, it was relatively easy to move about between the wide open spaces between the huge buildings – the *Cordelie*, the *Artiglierie*, the shot-towers, and above all, the shipyards. As long as Ezio kept to the dark late-afternoon shadows and took care to avoid the patrols within the vast complex, he knew he would be all right, though naturally he remained extremely vigilant.

Guided at last by the sounds of merriment and mocking laughter, he found his way to the side of one of the main dry-docks, into which a massive galley was drawn. On the side of one of the dock’s massive walls, an iron cage had been hung. In it was Bartolomeo, a vigorous bear of a man in his early thirties and so just four or five years’ Ezio’s senior. Around him was a crowd of Silvio’s mercenaries, and Ezio thought how much better employed they’d have been patrolling than triumphing over an enemy they’d already rendered helpless, but

he reflected that Silvio Barbarigo, Grand Inquisitor though he was, was not experienced in matters of handling troops.

Ezio didn't know how long Bartolomeo had been chained up in his cage; certainly for many hours. But his anger and energy seemed unaffected by his ordeal. Given that he'd almost certainly been given nothing to eat or drink, this was remarkable.

'*Luridi codardi!* Filthy cowards!' he was shouting at his tormentors, one of whom, Ezio noticed, had dipped a sponge in vinegar and was pushing it up to Bartolomeo's lips on the tip of a lance in the hope that he'd think it was water. Bartolomeo spat it away. 'I'll take you all on! At the same time! With one arm – no, *both* arms – tied behind my back! I'll fucking eat you *alive*!' He laughed. 'You must be wondering how such a thing could be even possible, but just let me out of here and I'll gladly demonstrate! *Miserabili pezzi di merda*!'

The Inquisitor's guards howled in derision, and poked at Bartolomeo with poles, making the cage swing. It had no solid bottom, and Bartolomeo had to grip hard with his feet on the bars beneath to keep his balance.

'You have no honour! No valour! No virtue!' He summoned enough saliva into his mouth to spit down at them. 'And people wonder why the star of Venice has begun to wane.' Then his voice took on almost a pleading tone. 'I'll show mercy to whomever here has the courage to release me. All the rest of you are going to die! By my hand! I swear it!'

'Save your fucking breath,' one of the guards called out. 'No one's going to die today but you, you fucking turdbag.'

All this time Ezio, sheltered by the shadow of a brick colonnade that skirted a basin where some of the smaller war-galleys were moored, was working out a way of saving the *condottiero*. There were ten guards around the cage, all with their backs to him, and there was none other in view. What was more, they were off-duty and had no armour on. Ezio checked his poison-dagger. Dispatching the guards should present no difficulty. He'd timed the passing of the on-duty patrols and they came by every time the shadow of the dock wall lengthened by three inches. But there was the additional problem of releasing Bartolomeo, keeping him quiet while doing so, and making quick work of it. He thought hard. He knew there wasn't much time.

'What sort of man sells his honour and dignity for a few pieces of silver?' Bartolomeo was bellowing, but his throat was getting dry and he was running out of steam despite his iron will.

'Isn't that what you do, fuckwit? Aren't you a mercenary like us?'

'I have never been in the service of a traitor and a coward, as you are!' Bartolomeo's eyes glittered. The men standing beneath him were momentarily

cowed. ‘Do you think I don’t know why you’ve chained me up? Do you think I don’t know who your boss Silvio’s puppet-master is? I’ve been fighting the weasel who controls him since most of you boys were puppies suckling your mothers’ teats!’

Ezio was now listening with interest. One of the soldiers picked up a half-brick and threw it angrily. It bounced harmlessly off the bars of the cage.

‘That’s right, you fuckers!’ Bartolomeo yelled hoarsely. ‘You just try it on with me! I swear, once I’m free of this cage I’m going to make it my mission to sever each and every one of your fucking heads and shove them up your fucking girlie arses! And I’ll mix and match the heads too, because you little tykes clearly don’t know your heads from your arses anyway!’

The men below were getting seriously angry now. It was clear that only orders prevented them from stabbing the man to death with their pikes, or shooting arrows at him, as he hung defencelessly above them in his cage. But by now Ezio had seen that the padlock which secured the door of the cage was relatively small. Bartolomeo’s captors relied on the fact that the cage was hung high. No doubt they intended that the harsh sun of the day, and chill of the night, coupled with dehydration and starvation, would finish him off, unless he broke down and agreed to talk. But from the look of him, that was something Bartolomeo would never do.

Ezio knew he had to act fast. An on-duty patrol would pass by very shortly. Releasing the spring on his poison-blade, he moved forward with the speed and grace of a wolf, covering the distance in a matter of seconds. He scythed through the group and had sliced death into the bodies of five men before the others knew what was happening. Drawing his sword, he savagely killed the rest, their vain blows glancing off the metal guard on his left forearm, while Bartolomeo watched open-mouthed. At last, silent, Ezio turned and looked up.

‘Can you jump from there?’ he asked.

‘If you can get me out, I’ll jump like a fucking flea.’

Ezio grabbed one of the dead soldiers’ pikes. Its point was iron, not steel, and cast, not forged. It would do. Balancing it in his left hand, he prepared himself, crouched, and sprang into the air, at last clinging to the outer bars of the cage.

Bartolomeo looked at him pop-eyed. ‘How in buggery did you do that?’ he asked.

‘Training,’ said Ezio, smiling tightly. He forced the point of the pike through the hasp of the lock and twisted. It resisted at first, then broke. Ezio pulled the door open, free-falling to the ground as he did so, and landing with the grace of a cat. ‘Now you jump,’ he ordered. ‘Be quick.’

‘Who are you?’

‘Get on with it!’

Nervously, Bartolomeo braced himself against the open door of the cage and then flung himself forwards. He landed heavily, the breath knocked out of him, but when Ezio helped him to his feet, he shook his rescuer off proudly. ‘I’m all right,’ he huffed. ‘I’m just not used to doing fucking circus tricks.’

‘No bones broken, then?’

‘Fuck you, whoever you are,’ said Bartolomeo, beaming. ‘But you have my thanks!’ And to Ezio’s surprise, he gave him a bear-hug. ‘Who are you anyway? The Arch-fucking-angel Gabriel or what?’

‘My name is Auditore, Ezio.’

‘Bartolomeo d’Alviani. Delighted.’

‘We haven’t got time for this,’ Ezio snapped. ‘As you well know.’

‘Don’t try to teach me my job, acrobat,’ said Bartolomeo, still quite genially. ‘Anyway, I owe you one for this!’

But they had already wasted too much time. Someone must have noticed from the ramparts what was going on, for now alarm bells started to ring and patrols emerged from the buildings nearby to close on them.

‘Come on, you bastards!’ bellowed Bartolomeo, swinging fists that made Dante Moro’s look like panelling hammers. It was Ezio’s turn to look on admiringly, as Bartolomeo ploughed into the oncoming soldiers. Together, they beat their way back to the wicket gate, and at last were clear.

‘Let’s get out of here!’ Ezio exclaimed.

‘Shouldn’t we break a few more heads?’

‘Perhaps we should try to avoid conflict for now?’

‘Are you afraid?’

‘Just practical. I know your blood’s up, but they do outnumber us by one hundred to one.’

Bartolomeo considered. ‘You have a point. And after all, I’m a commander. I ought to think like one, not leave it to some whippersnapper like you to make me see sense.’ And then he lowered his voice and said in a concerned tone, ‘I just hope my little Bianca is safe.’

Ezio didn’t have time to question or even wonder about Bartolomeo’s aside. They had to make tracks, and they did, racing through the town back towards Bartolomeo’s headquarters on San Pietro. But not before Bartolomeo had made two important diversions, to the Riva San Basio and the Corte Nuova, to alert his agents in those places that he was alive and free, and to summon his scattered forces – those who had not been taken prisoner – to regroup.

Back at San Pietro at dusk, they found that a handful of Bartolomeo’s *condottieri* had survived the attack and had now emerged from their hiding-

places, moving among the already fly-blown dead and attempting to bury them and put matters in order. They were elated to see their Captain again, but he was distracted, running here and there in his encampment, calling mournfully, ‘Bianca! Bianca! Where are you?’

‘Who’s he after?’ Ezio asked a sergeant-at-arms. ‘She must be worth a lot to him.’

‘She is, *Signore*,’ grinned the sergeant. ‘And far more reliable than most of her sex.’

Ezio ran to catch up with his new ally. ‘Is everything all right?’

‘What do you think? Look at the state of this place! And poor Bianca! If something’s happened to her…’

The big man shouldered a door, already half off its hinges, on to the ground and entered a bunker which, from the look of it, must have been a map-room before the attack. The valuable maps had been mutilated or stolen, but Bartolomeo sifted through the wreckage until, with a cry of triumph –

‘Bianca! Oh, my darling! Thank God you’re all right!’

He had pulled a massive greatsword clear of the rubble and brandished it, roaring, ‘Aha! You are safe! I never doubted it! Bianca! Meet… What’s your name again?’

‘Auditore, Ezio.’

Bartolomeo looked thoughtful. ‘Of course. Your reputation goes before you, Ezio.’

‘I am glad of it.’

‘What brings you here?’

‘I too have business with Silvio Barbarigo. I think he’s outstayed his welcome in Venice.’

‘Silvio! That turd! He needs flushing down a fucking latrine!’

‘I thought I might be able to rely on your help.’

‘After that rescue? I owe you my life, let alone my help.’

‘How many men do you have?’

‘How many survivors here, Sergeant-at-Arms?’

The sergeant-at-arms Ezio had spoken to earlier came running up and saluted. ‘Twelve, *Capitano*, including you and me, and this gentleman here.’

‘Thirteen!’ shouted Bartolomeo, waving Bianca.

‘Against a good two hundred,’ said Ezio. He turned to the sergeant-at-arms. ‘And how many of your men did they take prisoner?’

‘Most of them,’ the man replied. ‘The attack took us completely by surprise. Some fled, but Silvio’s men took far more away with them in chains.’

‘Look, Ezio,’ said Bartolomeo. ‘I’m going to supervise rounding up the rest of my men who are at liberty. I’ll get this place cleaned up and bury my dead and we’ll regroup here. Do you think in the meantime you can see to the business of liberating the men Silvio’s taken prisoner? Since that’s a thing you seem to be very good at?’

‘*Intensi*.’

‘Get back here with them as soon as you can. Good luck!’

Ezio, his Codex weapons buckled on, headed westward again towards the Arsenal but wondered if Silvio would have kept all Bartolomeo’s men prisoner there. He hadn’t seen any of them when he had gone to rescue their Captain. At the Arsenal itself he stuck to the shadows of the falling night and tried to listen to the conversations of the guards stationed along the perimeter walls.

‘Have you ever seen bigger cages?’ said one.

‘No. And the poor bastards are crammed into them like sardines. I don’t think Captain Barto would have treated *us* like that, if *he’d* been the victor,’ said his comrade.

‘Of course he would. And keep your noble thoughts to yourself, if you want to keep your head on your shoulders. I say finish them off. Why don’t we just lower the cages into the basins, and drown the lot of them?’

At that, Ezio tensed. There were three huge rectangular basins inside the Arsenal, each designed to hold thirty galleys. They were on the north side of the complex, surrounded by thick brick walls and covered by heavy wooden roofs. Doubtless the cages – larger versions of the one which had imprisoned Bartolomeo – were suspended by chains over the water in one or more of the *bacini*.

‘One hundred and fifty trained men? That’d be a waste. For my money, Silvio’s hoping to turn them to our cause,’ said the second uniform.

‘Well, they’re mercenaries like us. So why not?’

‘Right! They just need to be softened up a little first. Show them who’s boss.’

‘*Spero di sì*.’

‘Thank God they don’t know their boss has escaped.’

The first guard spat. ‘He won’t last long.’

Ezio left them and made his way to the wicket gate he’d discovered earlier. There was no time to wait for any changing of the guard, but he could judge the time by the distance of the moon from the horizon and he knew he had a couple of hours. He flicked the spring-blade out – his original Codex weapon and still his favourite – and slashed open the throat of the fat old guard Silvio had seen fit to put on duty alone there, pushing him clear before any of the man’s blood

could get on to his clothes. Quickly he wiped the blade clean on the grass and exchanged it for his poison-blade. He made the sign of the Cross over the body.

The compound within the walls of the Arsenal looked different by the light of a sickle moon and a few stars, but Ezio knew where the basins were located and went, skirting the walls and keeping an ever-watchful eye out for Silvio's men, to the first one. He peered through the great open arches into the watery gloom beyond, but could see nothing but galleys bobbing gently in the half-light of the stars. The second bore the same fruit, but as he approached the third he heard voices.

'It's not too late for you to pledge yourselves to our cause. Only say the word and you'll be spared,' one of the Inquisitor's sergeants was calling in a mocking tone.

Ezio, pressing himself against the wall, saw a dozen troops, weapons laid down, bottles in their hands, gazing up into the gloom of the roof, where three massive iron cages were suspended. He saw that an invisible mechanism was slowly lowering the cages towards the water beneath. And there were no galleys in this basin. Only black, oily water, in which something unseen but frightful teemed.

The Inquisitor's guards included one man who wasn't drinking, a man who seemed constantly on the alert, a huge, terrible man. Ezio instantly recognized Dante Moro! So, with the death of his master Marco, the man-mountain had transferred his allegiance to the cousin, Silvio, the Inquisitor, who had already professed his admiration for the massive bodyguard.

Ezio made his way cautiously round the walls until he came to a large open-frame box containing an arrangement of cog-wheels, pulleys and ropes that might have been designed by Leonardo. This was the mechanism, driven by a water-clock, which was lowering the cages. Ezio drew his ordinary dagger from its sheath on the left-hand side of his belt and jammed it between two of the cogwheels. The mechanism stopped, and not before time, for the cages were now inches from the water's surface. But the guards instantly noticed that the cages' descent had ceased, and some came running towards the machinery that controlled it. Ezio sprang out his poison-blade and hacked at them as they came. Two fell into the water from the jetty and screamed, briefly, sinking into the oily black water. Meanwhile, Ezio raced along the perimeter of the basin towards the others, all of whom fled in alarm save Dante, who stood his ground and loomed like a tower over Ezio.

'Silvio's dog now, are you?' said Ezio.

'Better a live dog than a dead lion,' said Dante, reaching out to cuff Ezio into the water.

‘Stand down!’ said Ezio, ducking the blow. ‘I have no quarrel with you!’

‘Oh, shut your face,’ said Dante, picking Ezio up by the scruff of the neck and bashing him against the wall of the basin. ‘I have no serious quarrel with you, either.’ He could see that Ezio was stunned. ‘Just stay there. I must go and warn my master, but I’ll be back to feed you to the fishes if you give me any more trouble!’

And he was gone. Ezio shook his head to clear it, and stood up, groggily. The men in the cages were shouting and Ezio saw that one of Silvio’s guards had crept back in and was about to dislodge the dagger he’d jammed in the cage-lowering mechanism. He thanked God he had not forgotten his old knife-throwing skills learned at Monteriggioni, produced a knife from his belt, and hurled it with deadly accuracy. The guard stumbled over, groaning, snatching helplessly at the blade which was buried between his eyes.

Ezio snatched a gaff from a rack on the wall behind him, and, leaning over the water dangerously, deftly hauled the nearest cage towards him. Its door was closed by a simple bolt and he shot it back, releasing the men inside, who tumbled out on to the wharf. With their help, he was able to haul in the remaining cages and release their prisoners in turn.

Exhausted though they were by their ordeal, they cheered him.

‘Come on!’ he cried. ‘I’ve got to get you back to your Captain!’

Once they had overwhelmed the men guarding the basins, they returned unopposed to San Pietro, where Bartolomeo and his men had an emotional reunion. In Ezio’s absence all the mercenaries who’d escaped Silvio’s initial onslaught had returned, and the encampment was once again *in perfetto ordine*.

‘*Salute*, Ezio!’ said Bartolomeo. ‘Welcome back! And well done, by God! I knew I could depend on you!’ He took Ezio’s hands between his. ‘You are indeed the mightiest of allies. One might almost think –’ but then he stopped himself, and said instead, ‘Thanks to you my army is restored to its former glory. Now our friend Silvio will see just how grave a mistake he’s made!’

‘So, what should we do? Make a direct assault on the Arsenal?’

‘No. A head-on assault would mean we’d be massacred at the gates. I think we should plant my men throughout the district and get them to cause enough trouble locally to tie most of Silvio’s men up.’

‘So – if the Arsenal is almost empty –’

‘You can take it with a hand-picked team.’

‘Let’s hope he takes the bait.’

‘He’s an Inquisitor. He knows how to bully people who are already at his mercy. He’s not a soldier. Hell, he doesn’t even have the wit to be a halfway decent chess-player!’

It took a few days to deploy Bartolomeo's *condottieri* about Castello and the Arsenal district. When all was ready, Bartolomeo and Ezio gathered the small group of hand-picked mercenaries they'd kept back for the assault on Silvio's bastion. Ezio himself had selected the men for their agility and skill at arms.

They'd planned the assault on the Arsenal with care. The following Friday night, all was in readiness. A mercenary was sent to the top of the tower of San Martino and, when the moon was at its height, he set off a massive Roman candle designed and provided by Leonardo's workshop. This was the signal for the attack. Dressed in dark leather gear, the *condottieri* of the task-force scaled the walls of the Arsenal on all four sides. Once over the battlements, the men moved like spectres through the quiet and undermanned fortress and quickly contained the skeleton guard within. It wasn't long before Ezio and Bartolomeo found themselves confronting their deadliest foes – Silvio and Dante.

Dante, wearing iron knuckle-dusters, was swinging a massive chain-mace around, protecting his master. It was hard for either Ezio or Bartolomeo to come within range, as their own men engaged the enemy.

'A fine specimen, isn't he?' crowed Silvio from the safety of the ramparts. 'You should be honoured to die by his hand!'

'Suck my balls, you fuck!' Bartolomeo yelled back. He'd managed to snag the mace in his battle-staff, and Dante, his weapon torn from his hand, retreated. 'Come on, Ezio! We need to catch that *grassone bastardo*!'

Dante turned, having reached his objective, an iron club pierced with twisted nails, and faced them again. He swung it at Bartolomeo and one of the nails tore a furrow in his shoulder.

'I'll have you for that, you pig-eyed sack of shit!' bellowed Bartolomeo.

Meanwhile Ezio had loaded and fired his pistol at Silvio, and missed. His shot ricocheted off the brick walls in a shower of sparks and splinters.

'Do you think I don't know why you're really here, Auditore?' Silvio barked, though clearly frightened by the gunshot. 'But you're too late! There's nothing you can do to stop us now!'

Ezio had reloaded, and fired again. But he was angry, and confused at Silvio's words, and once again the shot went wide.

'Hah!' spat Silvio from the ramparts as Dante and Bartolomeo slogged it out. 'You pretend you don't know! Though once Dante's done with you and your muscle-bound friend, it'll hardly matter either way. You'll just follow your fool of a father! Do you know what my greatest regret is? That I couldn't have been Giovanni's hangman myself. How I would have loved to pull that lever and watch your miserable dad kick and gasp and dangle! And then of course there would have been plenty of time for that winesack of an uncle of yours, *ciccione*

Mario, and your not-quite-past-it mother, droopy-dugs Maria, and that luscious little strawberry Claudia, your sister. How long it's been since I fucked anything under twenty-five! Mind you, I'd keep the last two for the voyage – it can get quite lonely out at sea!'

Through the red mist of his fury, Ezio concentrated on the information the spittle-strewn lips of the Inquisitor were madly spewing forth along with the insults.

By now, Silvio's guards, at superior odds, were beginning to rally against Bartolomeo's commandos. Dante dealt another swingeing blow at Bartolomeo, thumping him in the ribcage with his knuckle-dusters and causing him to falter. Ezio fired a third bullet at Silvio and this time it ripped through the Inquisitor's robes close to his neck, but though the man staggered, and Ezio saw a thin line of blood, he did not fall. He shouted a command to Dante, who fell back, swarming up to the rampart to join his master, and with him disappearing over the other side of the wall. Ezio knew there'd be a ladder on the other side to take them down to the jetty, and, yelling to Bartolomeo to follow him, he dashed out of the arena of battle to cut his foes off.

He saw them clambering into a large boat, but noticed the anger and despair on their faces. Following their gaze, he saw a huge black galley disappearing across the lagoon southwards.

'We've been betrayed!' Ezio heard Silvio say to Dante. 'The ship has sailed without us! God damn them! I've been nothing but loyal and yet this – *this!* – is how they repay me!'

'Let's use this boat to catch them up,' said Dante.

'It's too late for that – and we'd never get to the Island in a craft this size; but at least we can use it to get away from this catastrophe!'

'Then let us cast off, *Altezza*.'

'Indeed.'

Dante turned to the trembling crew. 'Cast off! Raise the sails! Look lively!'

At that moment Ezio sprang from the shadows across the wharf and on to the boat. The frightened sailors made themselves scarce, diving into the murky lagoon.

'Get away from me, murderer!' shrieked Silvio.

'You've delivered your last insult,' said Ezio, stabbing him in the gut and drawing the blades of his double-dagger slowly across his belly. 'And for what you said about my kinswomen I'd cut your balls off with this if I thought it was worth it.'

Dante stood rooted to the spot. Ezio fixed him with his eye. The big man looked tired.

‘It’s over,’ Ezio told him. ‘You backed the wrong horse.’

‘Maybe I did,’ said Dante. ‘I’m going to kill you anyway. You filthy assassin. You make me tired.’

Ezio snapped out his *pistola* and fired. The slug hit Dante full in the face. He fell.

Ezio knelt by Silvio to give him absolution. He was nothing if not conscientious, and always remembered that killing should only happen if there were no alternative; and that the dying, who very soon would have no rights at all, should at least be accorded the last rites.

‘Where were you going, Silvio? What is that galley? I thought you sought the Doge’s seat?’

Silvio smiled thinly. ‘That was just a distraction… We were meant to sail…’

‘Where?’

‘Too late,’ smiled Silvio, and died.

Ezio turned to Dante and cradled the massive leonine head in the crook of his arm.

‘Cyprus is their destination, Auditore,’ croaked Dante. ‘I can perhaps redeem my soul at the last by telling you the truth. They want… They want…’ But choking on his own blood, the big man passed on.

Ezio searched both men’s wallets but found nothing except a letter to Dante from his wife. Shamefacedly, he read it.

> *Amore mio*
> *I wonder if ever the day will come when these words might make sense to you once more. I am sorry for what I have done – for allowing Marco to take me from you, divorce you, and make me* his *wife. But now that he has died, I may yet find a way for us to be joined again. I wonder, though, if you will even remember me? Or were the wounds you suff ered in battle too grave? Do my words stir, if not your memory, then your heart? But perhaps it doesn’t matter what they say, because I know you’re still in my heart, somewhere. I will find a way, my love. To remind you. To restore you…*
>
> *Forever yours*
> *Gloria*

There was no address. Ezio folded the letter carefully and put it in his wallet. He would ask Teodora if she knew of this strange history, and if she could return the letter to its sender, with news of the death of this faithless creature’s true husband.

He looked at the corpses and made the sign of the Cross over them ‘*Requiescant in pace*,’ he said, sadly.

Ezio was still standing over the dead men when Bartolomeo came up, panting. ‘See you didn’t need my help, as usual,’ he said.

‘Have you taken back the Arsenal?’

‘Do you think I’d be here if we hadn’t?’

‘Congratulations!’

‘*Evviva!*’

But Ezio was watching the sea. ‘We’ve got Venice back, my friend,’ he said. ‘And Agostino can rule it without further fear of the Templars. But I think there’ll be little rest for me. Do you see that galley on the horizon?’

‘Yes.’

‘Dante told me with his dying breath that it is bound for Cyprus.’

‘To what end?’

‘That, *amico*, is what I need to find out.’

21

Ezio could not believe it was Midsummer's Day, in the Year of Christ 1487. His twenty-eighth birthday. He was by himself on the Bridge of the Fistfighters, leaning on the balustrade and gloomily looking at the dank water of the canal beneath him. As he watched, a rat swam by, pushing a cargo of cabbage leaves filched from the nearby greengrocer's barge towards a hole in the black brick of the canal's bank.

'There you are, Ezio!' said a cheery voice, and he could smell Rosa's musky scent before he turned to greet her. 'It's been too long! I might almost think you've been avoiding me!'

'I've been… busy.'

'Of course you have. What would Venice do without you!'

Ezio shook his head sadly, as Rosa leant comfortably on the balustrade beside him.

'Why so serious, *bello*?' she asked.

Ezio gave her a deadpan look and shrugged. 'Happy Birthday to Me.'

'It's your birthday? You serious? Wow! *Rallegramenti!* That's wonderful!'

'I wouldn't go that far,' sighed Ezio. 'It's been over ten years since I watched my father and brothers die. And I have spent ten years hunting down the men responsible, the men on my father's list, and those added to it since his death. And I know I am close to the end now – but I am no closer to understanding what any of it has really been *for*.'

'Ezio, you've dedicated your life to a good cause. It has made you lonely, isolated, but in one sense it has been your vocation. And though the instrument you have used to further your cause is death, you have never been unjust. Venice is a far better place now than it ever was, because of you. So cheer up. Anyway,

seeing as it's your birthday, here's a present. Very good timing, as it happens!' She took out an official-looking logbook.

'Thank you, Rosa. Not quite what I'd imagined you'd give me for my birthday. What is it?'

'Just something I happened to… pick up. It's the shipping manifest from the Arsenal. The date your black galley sailed for Cyprus late last year is entered in it –'

'Seriously?' Ezio reached for the book but Rosa teasingly held it away from him. 'Give it to me, Rosa. This isn't a joke.'

'Everything has its price…' she whispered.

'If you say so.'

He held her in his arms for a long, lingering moment. She melted against him and he quickly snatched the book away.

'Hey! That isn't fair!' she laughed. 'Anyway, just to spare you the suspense, that galley of yours is scheduled to return to Venice – tomorrow!'

'What, I wonder, can they have on board?'

'Why am I not surprised that someone not a million miles from here is going to find out?'

Ezio beamed. 'Let's go and celebrate first!'

But at that moment a familiar figure bustled up.

'Leonardo!' said Ezio, greatly surprised. 'I thought you were in Milan!'

'Just got back,' replied Leonardo. 'They told me where to find you. Hello, Rosa. Sorry, Ezio, but we really need to talk.'

'Now? This minute?'

'Sorry.'

Rosa laughed. 'Go on boys, have fun, I'll keep!'

Leonardo ushered a reluctant Ezio away.

'This had better be good,' muttered Ezio.

'Oh, it is, it is,' said Leonardo placatingly. He led Ezio along several narrow alleys until they arrived back at his workshop. Leonardo busied about, producing some warm wine and stale cakes, and a pile of documents which he dumped on a large trestle table in the middle of his study.

'I had your Codex pages delivered to Monteriggioni as promised, but I couldn't resist studying them some more myself and I've copied out my findings. I don't know why I'd never made the connection before, but when I put them together I realized the markings and symbols and ancient alphabets can be decoded and we seem to have struck gold – for all these pages are contiguous!' He interrupted himself. 'This wine is too warm! Mind you, I've got used to San Colombano; this Veneto stuff is like gnat's piss by comparison.'

‘Go on,’ said Ezio patiently.

‘Listen to this.’ Leonardo produced a pair of eyeglasses and perched them on his nose. He shuffled through his papers and read: ‘The Prophet… will appear… when the Second Piece is brought to the Floating City…’

Ezio drew in his breath sharply at the words. ‘Prophet?’ he repeated.’ “Only the Prophet may open it…” “Two Pieces of Eden…”’

‘Ezio?’ Leonardo looked quizzical, doffing his eyeglasses. ‘What is it? Does this ring some kind of bell with you?’

Ezio looked at him. He appeared to be coming to some kind of decision. ‘We’ve known each other a long time, Leonardo. If I can’t trust you, there’s nobody… Listen! My Uncle Mario spoke of it, long ago. He’s already deciphered other pages of this Codex, as had my father, Giovanni. There’s a prophecy hidden in it, a prophecy about a secret, ancient vault, which holds something – something very powerful!’

‘Really? That’s amazing!’ But then a thought struck Leonardo. ‘Look, Ezio, if we’ve found all this out from the Codex, how much do the Barbarigi and the others you’ve been pitched against know about it? Maybe they know about the existence of this vault you mention too. And if so, that’s not good.’

‘Wait!’ said Ezio, his brain racing. ‘What if that’s why they sent the galley to Cyprus? To *find* this “Piece of Eden”! And *bring it back to Venice*!’

‘ “When the Second Piece is brought to the Floating City” – of course!’

‘It’s coming back to me! “The Prophet will appear…” “… Only the Prophet can open the Vault!”… My God, Leo, when my Uncle told me about the Codex, I was too young, too brash, to imagine that it was anything but an old man’s fantasy. But now I see it plain! The murder of Giovanni Mocenigo, the killing of my kinsmen, the attempt on the life of Duke Lorenzo and the horrible death of his brother – it’s all been part of *his* plan – to find the Vault – the first name on my *List*! The one I have yet to strike a line through – *The Spaniard*!’

Leonardo breathed deeply. He knew whom Ezio was talking about. ‘Rodrigo Borgia.’ His voice was a whisper.

‘The same!’ Ezio paused. ‘The Cyprus galley arrives tomorrow. I plan to be there to meet it.’

Leonardo embraced him. ‘Good luck, my dear friend,’ he said.

The following dawn found Ezio, armed with his Codex weapons and a bandolier of throwing-knives, standing in the shadows of the colonnade near the docks, watching closely as a group of men, dressed in plain uniforms to avoid attracting undue attention but discreetly displaying the crest of Cardinal Rodrigo Borgia, unloaded a plain-looking, smallish crate from a black galley which had recently

put in from Cyprus. They handled the crate with kid gloves, and one of their number, under guard, hoisted it on to his shoulder and prepared to set off with it. But then Ezio noticed that several other guards were hoisting similar crates on to their shoulders, five of them in all. Did each crate contain some precious artefact, the second piece, or were all but one of them decoys? And the guards all looked the same, certainly from the distance at which Ezio would be obliged to shadow them.

Just as Ezio prepared to break cover and follow, he noticed another man watching what was going on from a similar vantage-point to his own. He suppressed an involuntary gasp as he recognized this second man as his uncle, Mario Auditore; but there was no time to hail or challenge him, as the Borgia-trooper carrying the crate had already moved off with his guard. Ezio pursued them at a safe distance. However, a question nagged him – had the other man really been his uncle? And if so, how had he got to Venice, and why, at this precise moment?

But he had to put the notion away as he tailed the Borgia guards, concentrating hard to keep the one with the original crate in his line of sight – if that indeed were the one that contained – whatever it was. One of the ‘Pieces of Eden’?

The guards arrived at a square which had five streets leading off it. Each crate-carrying guard, with his escort, here set off in a different direction. Ezio swarmed up the side of a nearby building so that he could follow the course of each guard from the rooftops. Watching them keenly, he saw one of them leave his escort and turn into the courtyard of a solid-looking brick building, place his crate on the ground there, and open it. He was quickly joined by a Borgia sergeant. Ezio bounded over the roofs to hear what was being said between them.

‘The Master awaits,’ the sergeant was saying. ‘Repackage it with care. Now!’

Ezio watched as the guard transferred an object wrapped carefully in straw from the crate to a teak box brought to him from the building by a servant. Ezio thought fast. The Master! In his experience, when Templar minions mentioned that title it could only refer to one man – Rodrigo Borgia! They were clearly repacking the true artefact in an attempt to double their security. But now Ezio knew exactly which guard to target.

He slipped down to street level again and cornered the trooper carrying the teak box. The sergeant had left to rejoin the escort of Cardinal’s guards, waiting outside the courtyard. Ezio had a minute to slit the throat of the trooper, pull the body out of sight, and don his outer uniform, cape and helmet.

He was about to shoulder the box when the temptation to have a quick glance inside it overwhelmed him and he lifted the lid. But at that moment the sergeant re-appeared at the gateway of the courtyard.

'Get a move on!'

'Yessir!' said Ezio.

'Just look fucking lively. This is probably the most important thing you'll do in your life. Do you get me?'

'Yessir.'

Ezio took his place at the centre of his escort and the detail set off.

They made their way through the city north from the Molo to the Campo dei Santi Giovanni e Paolo, where Messer Verrocchio's recent and massive equestrian statue of the *condottiero* Colleone dominated the square. Following the Fondamenta dei Mendicanti north again, they arrived at last at a dull-looking house in a terrace overlooking the canal. The sergeant knocked on the door with the pommel of his sword, and it immediately swung open. The group of guards hustled Ezio in first, and followed, and the door closed behind them. Heavy bolts were shot across it.

They were facing an ivy-festooned loggia, in which a beak-nosed man in his mid to late fifties sat, dressed in robes of dusty purple velvet. The men saluted. Ezio did so too, trying not to meet the icy cobalt eyes he knew too well. The Spaniard!

Rodrigo Borgia spoke to the sergeant. 'Is it really here? You were not followed?'

'No, *Altezza*. Everything went perfectly –'

'Go on!'

The sergeant cleared his throat. 'We followed your orders exactly as specified. The mission to Cyprus was more difficult than we had anticipated. There were… complications at the outset. Certain adherents to the Cause… had to be abandoned in the interests of our success. But we have returned with the artefact. And have transported it to you with all due care, as *Su Altezza* instructed. And according to our agreement, *Altezza*, we now look forward to being generously recompensed.'

Ezio knew that he could not allow the teak box and its contents to fall into the hands of the Cardinal. At that moment, when the unpleasant but necessary subject of payment for services rendered had come up, and as usual the supplier had to nudge the client for the cash due for the special duties undertaken, Ezio grasped his opportunity. Like so many rich people, the Cardinal could be miserly when the time came for handing over money. Unspringing the poison-blade on his right forearm and the double-bladed dagger on his left, Ezio cut down the

sergeant, a single stab to the man's exposed neck enough to deliver the deadly venom to his bloodstream. Ezio quickly turned on the five guards of the escort with his double-dagger in one hand, and the poison-blade under his right wrist, spinning like a dervish, using quick, clinical movements to deliver single lethal blows. Moments later, all the guards lay dead at his feet.

Rodrigo Borgia looked down at him, sighing heavily. 'Ezio Auditore. Well, well. It's been some time.' The Cardinal seemed completely unruffled.

'*Cardinale*.' Ezio gave an ironic bow.

'Give it to me,' said Rodrigo, indicating the box.

'Tell me first where he is.'

'Where who is?'

'Your Prophet!' Ezio looked around. 'It doesn't look as if anyone's shown up.' He paused. More seriously, he continued: 'How many people have died for this? For what's in this box? And look! There's *nobody* here!'

Rodrigo chuckled. A sound like bones rattling. 'You claim not to be a Believer,' he said. 'And yet here you are. Do you not see the Prophet? He is already present! *I am the Prophet!*'

Ezio's grey eyes widened. The man was possessed! But what curious madness was this, which seemed to transcend the rational and the natural courses of life itself? Alas, Ezio's pondering left him momentarily off-guard. The Spaniard drew a *schiavona*, a light but deadly-looking sword, with a cat's-head pommel, from his robes and leapt from the loggia, aiming the thin sword at Ezio's throat. 'Give me the Apple,' he snarled.

'That's what's in this box? An *apple*? It must be a pretty special one,' said Ezio, while in his mind his uncle's voice reverberated: *a piece of Eden*. 'Come and take it from me!'

Rodrigo sliced at Ezio with his blade, slashing his tunic and drawing blood at the first pass.

'Are you alone, Ezio? Where are your Assassin friends now?'

'I don't need their help to deal with you!'

Ezio used his daggers to cut and slash, and his left-forearm guard-brace to parry Rodrigo's blows. But, though he landed no cut with the poison-blade, his double-blade stabbed through the velvet robe of the Cardinal and he saw it stained with the man's blood.

'You little shit,' bellowed Rodrigo, in pain. 'I can see that I'll need help to master you! Guards! Guards!'

Suddenly, a dozen armed men bearing the Borgia crest on their tunics stormed into the courtyard where Ezio and the Cardinal were confronting one another. Ezio knew there was precious little poison left in the hilt of his right-hand

dagger. He leapt back, the better to defend himself against Rodrigo's reinforcements, and at that moment one of the new guards stooped to sweep the teak box off the ground and hand it to his Master.

'Thank you, *uomo coraggioso*!'

Ezio, meanwhile, was seriously outmatched, but he fought with a strategic coldness born of an absolute desire to recapture the box and its contents. Sheathing his Codex blades, he reached for his bandolier of throwing-knives and shot them from his hands with deadly accuracy, first bringing down the *uomo coraggioso* and then, with a second knife, knocking the box from Rodrigo's gnarled hands.

The Spaniard bent to pick it up again and make his retreat, when – *shoof!* – another throwing-knife hurtled through the air to clatter against a stone column inches from the Cardinal's face. But this knife had not been thrown by Ezio.

Ezio whirled round to see a familiar, jovial, bearded figure behind him. Older, perhaps, and greyer, and heavier, but no less deft. 'Uncle Mario!' he exclaimed. 'I knew I'd seen you earlier!'

'Can't let you have all the fun,' said Mario. 'And don't worry, *nipote*. You are not alone!'

But a Borgia guard was bearing down on Ezio, halberd raised. The moment before he could deliver the crushing blow which would have sent Ezio into an endless night, a crossbow bolt appeared as if by magic, buried in the man's forehead. He dropped his weapon and fell forwards, a look of disbelief etched on his face. Ezio looked round again and saw – *La Volpe*!

'What are you doing here, Fox?'

'We heard you might need some back-up,' said the Fox, reloading quickly as more guards began to pour out of the building. It was as well that more reinforcements, in the shape of Antonio and Bartolomeo, appeared on Ezio's side.

'Don't let Borgia get away with that box!' yelled Antonio.

Bartolomeo was using his greatsword Bianca like a scythe, cutting a swathe through the ranks of guards as they tried to overpower him by sheer force of numbers. And gradually the tide of battle turned back in favour of the Assassins and their allies.

'We've got them covered now, *nipote*,' called Mario. 'Look to the Spaniard!'

Ezio turned to see Rodrigo making for a doorway at the rear of the loggia and hastened to cut him off, but the Cardinal, sword in hand, was ready for him. 'This is a losing battle for you, my boy,' he snarled. 'You cannot stop what is written! You'll die by my hand like your father and your brothers –for death is the fate that awaits all who attempt to defy the Templars.'

Nevertheless, Rodrigo's voice lacked conviction and, looking round, Ezio saw that the last of his guards had fallen. He blocked Rodrigo's retreat at the threshold of the doorway, raising his own sword and preparing to strike, saying, 'This is for my father!' But the Cardinal ducked the blow, knocking Ezio off balance, yet dropping the precious box as he darted through the doorway to save his skin.

'Make no mistake,' he said balefully as he left. 'I live to fight another day! And then I'll make sure your death is as painful as it will be slow.'

And he was gone.

Ezio, winded, was trying to catch his breath and struggle to his feet when a woman's hand reached down to help him. Looking up, he saw that the owner of the hand was – Paola!

'He's gone,' she said, smiling. 'But it doesn't matter. We have what we came for.'

'No! Did you hear what he said? I must get after him and finish this!'

'Calm yourself,' said another woman, coming up. It was Teodora. Looking round the assembled company, Ezio could see all his allies, Mario, the Fox, Antonio, Bartolomeo, Paola and Teodora. And there was someone else. A pale, dark-haired young man with a thoughtful, humorous face.

'What are you all doing here?' asked Ezio, sensing a tension among them.

'Perhaps the same thing as you, Ezio,' said the young stranger. 'Hoping to see the Prophet appear.'

Ezio was confused and irritated. 'No! I came here to kill the Spaniard! I couldn't care less about your Prophet – if he exists at all. He certainly isn't here.'

'Isn't he?' The young man paused, looking steadily at Ezio. '*You* are.'

'What?'

'A prophet's arrival was foretold. And here you have been among us for so long without our guessing the truth. All along you were the One we sought.'

'I don't understand. Who are you, anyway?'

The young man sketched a bow. 'My name is Niccolò di Bernardo dei Machiavelli. I am a member of the Order of the Assassins, trained in the ancient ways, to safeguard the future of mankind. Just like you, just like every man and woman here.'

Ezio was astounded, looking from one face to the next. 'Is this true, Uncle Mario?' he said at last.

'Yes, my boy,' said Mario, stepping forward. 'We have all been guiding you, for years, teaching you all the skills you'd need to join our ranks.'

Ezio's head filled with questions. He did not know where to begin. 'I must ask you for news of my family,' he said to Mario. 'My mother, my sister…'

Mario smiled. ‘You are right to do so. They are safe and well. And they are no longer at the convent but at home with me at Monteriggioni. Maria will always be touched by the sadness of her loss, but she has much to console herself with now as she devotes herself to charitable work alongside the abbess. As for Claudia, the abbess could see, long before she could herself, that the life of a nun was not ideal for one of her temperament, and that there were other ways in which she might seek to serve Our Lord. She was released from her vows. She married my senior captain and soon, Ezio, she will present you with a nephew or niece of your own.’

‘Excellent news, Uncle. I never quite liked the idea of Claudia spending her life in a convent. But I have so many more questions to ask you.’

‘There will be a time for questions soon,’ said Machiavelli.

‘Much remains to be done before we can see our loved ones again, and celebrate,’ said Mario. ‘And it may be that we never will. We made Rodrigo abandon his box but he will not rest until it is back in his possession, so we must guard it with our lives.’

Ezio looked around the circle of Assassins, and noticed for the first time that each of them had a brand around the base of his or her left ring finger. But there was clearly no time for further questions now. Mario said to his associates, ‘I think it is time…’ Gravely, they nodded their assent, and Antonio took out a map and unfolded it, showing Ezio a point marked on it.

‘Meet us here at sunset,’ he said, in a tone of solemn command.

‘Come,’ said Mario to the others.

Machiavelli took charge of the box with its precious, mysterious contents, and the Assassins filed silently out into the street and departed, leaving Ezio alone.

Venice was eerily empty that evening and the great square in front of the basilica was silent and unoccupied save for the pigeons which were its permanent denizens. The bell tower rose to a giddying height above Ezio’s head as he began to climb it, but he did not hesitate. The meeting to which he’d been summoned would surely provide him with the answers to some of his questions, and though he knew in his heart of hearts that he would find some of the answers frightening, he also knew that he could not turn his back on them.

As he approached the top he could hear muted voices. At last he reached the stonework at the very top of the tower and swung himself into the bell-loft. A circular space had been cleared and the seven Assassins, all wearing cowls, were ranged around its perimeter, while a fire in a small brazier burned at its centre.

Paola took him by the hand and led him to the centre as Mario began to utter an incantation:

‘*Laa shay’a waqi’un moutlaq bale koulon moumkine.*… These are the words, spoken by our ancestors, that lie at the heart of our Creed…’

Machiavelli stepped forward and looked hard at Ezio. ‘Where other men blindly follow the truth, remember –’

And Ezio picked up the rest of the words as if he had known them all his life: ‘– Nothing is true.’

‘Where other men are limited by morality or law,’ continued Machiavelli, ‘remember –’

‘– Everything is permitted.’

Machiavelli said, ‘We work in the dark, to serve the light. We are Assassins.’

And the others joined in, intoning in unison: ‘Nothing is true, everything is permitted. Nothing is true, everything is permitted. Nothing is true, everything is permitted…’

When they had finished, Mario took Ezio’s left hand. ‘It is time,’ he told him. ‘In this modern age, we are not so literal as our ancestors. We do not demand the sacrifice of a finger. But the seal we mark ourselves with is permanent.’ He drew in his breath. ‘Are you ready to join us?’

Ezio, as if in a dream, but somehow knowing what to do and what was to come, extended his hand unhesitatingly. ‘I am,’ he said.

Antonio moved to the brazier and from it drew a red-hot branding-iron ending in two small semi-circles which could be brought together by means of a lever in the handle. Then he took Ezio’s hand and isolated the ring finger. ‘This only hurts for a while, brother,’ he said. ‘Like so many things.’

He inserted the branding-iron over the finger and squeezed the red-hot metal semi-circles together around its base. It seared the flesh and there was a burning smell but Ezio did not flinch. Antonio quickly removed the branding-iron and put it safely to one side. Then the Assassins removed their hoods and gathered round him. Uncle Mario clapped him proudly on the back. Teodora produced a little glass phial containing a clear, thick liquid, which she delicately rubbed on the ring burnt for ever on to Ezio’s finger. ‘This will soothe it,’ she said. ‘We are proud of you.’

Then Machiavelli stood in front of him and gave him a meaningful nod. ‘*Benvenuto*, Ezio. You are one of us now. It only remains to conclude your initiation ceremony, and then – then, my friend, we have serious work to do!’

With that, he glanced over the edge of the bell-tower. Far below, a number of bales of hay had been stacked a short distance away in various locations around the campanile – horse-fodder destined for the Ducal Palace. It seemed impossible to Ezio that from this height anyone could direct their fall accurately enough to land on one of those tiny targets, but that is what Machiavelli now did,

his cloak flying in the wind as he leapt. His companions followed suit, and Ezio watched with a mixture of horror and admiration as each made perfect landings and then gathered, looking up at him with what he hoped were encouraging expressions on their faces.

Used as he was to bounding over rooftops, he had never faced a leap of faith from such a height as this. The hay-bales seemed the size of slices of polenta, but he knew that there was no other way for him to reach the ground again but this; and that the longer he hesitated, the harder it would be. He took two or three deep breaths and then cast himself outwards and downwards into the night, arms aloft in a perfect swallow dive.

The fall seemed to take hours and the wind whistled past his ears, ruffling and shaking his clothing and his hair. Then the hay-bales rushed up to meet him. At the last moment, he shut his eyes…

… And crashed down into the hay! All the breath was knocked from his body, but as he got shakily to his feet he found that nothing was broken, and that he was, in fact, elated.

Mario came up to him, Teodora at his side. ‘I think he’ll do, don’t you?’ Mario asked Teodora.

The middle of that evening found Mario, Machiavelli and Ezio sitting around the big trestle table in Leonardo’s workshop. The peculiar artefact which Rodrigo Borgia had set so much store by lay before them, and they all regarded it with curiosity and awe.

‘It’s fascinating,’ Leonardo was saying. ‘Absolutely fascinating.’

‘What is it, Leonardo?’ asked Ezio. ‘What does it do?’

Leonardo said, ‘Well, so far, I’m stumped. It contains dark secrets, and its design is unlike anything, I would guess, ever seen on earth before – I’ve certainly never seen such sophisticated design… And I could no more *explain* this than explain to you why the earth goes round the sun.’

‘Surely you mean, “the sun goes round the earth”?’ said Mario, giving Leonardo an odd look. But Leonardo continued to examine the machine, carefully turning it in his hands, and as he did so, it started to glow in response, with a ghostly, inner, self-generated light.

‘It’s made of materials that really shouldn’t, in all logic, exist,’ Leonardo went on, wonderingly. ‘And yet this is clearly a very ancient device.’

‘It’s certainly referred to in the Codex pages we have,’ put in Mario. ‘I recognize it from its description there. The Codex calls it “a Piece of Eden”.’

‘And Rodrigo called it “the Apple”,’ added Ezio.

Leonardo looked at him sharply. ‘As in the apple from the Tree of Knowledge? The apple Eve gave to Adam?’

They all turned to look at the object again. It had begun to glow more brightly, and with a hypnotic effect. Ezio felt increasingly impelled, for reasons which he couldn’t fathom, to reach out and touch it. He could feel no heat coming from it, and yet along with the fascination there came a sense of inherent danger, as if to touch it might send bolts of lightning through him. He was unaware of the others; it seemed as if the world around him had grown dark and cold, and nothing existed any more outside himself and this… thing.

He watched as his hand moved forwards, as if it were no longer a part of him, as if he had no control over it, and at last it placed itself firmly on the artefact’s smooth side.

The first reaction he had was one of shock. The Apple looked metallic, but to the touch it was warm and soft, like a woman’s skin, as if it were *alive*! But there was no time to ponder that, for his hand was thrown free, and the following instant the glow from within the device, which had been steadily getting brighter, suddenly burst into a blinding kaleidoscope of light and colour, within whose whirling chaos Ezio could make out forms. For a moment he wrenched his eyes from it to look at his companions. Mario and Machiavelli had turned away, their eyes screwed up, their hands covering their heads in fear or pain. Leonardo stood transfixed, eyes wide, mouth open in awe. Looking back, Ezio saw the forms begin to coalesce. A great garden appeared, filled with monstrous creatures; there was a dark city on fire, huge clouds in the shape of mushrooms and bigger than cathedrals or palaces; an army on the march, but an army unlike any Ezio had ever seen or even imagined could exist; starving people in striped uniforms driven into brick buildings by men with whips and dogs; tall chimneys belching smoke; spiralling stars and planets; men in weird armour rolling in the blackness of space – and there, too, was another Ezio, another Leonardo, and Mario and Machiavelli, and more and more of them, the dupes of Time itself, tumbling helplessly over and over in the air, the playthings of a mighty wind, which now indeed seemed to roar around the room they were in.

‘Make it stop!’ someone bellowed.

Ezio gritted his teeth, and, without precisely knowing why, holding his right wrist in his left hand, forced his right hand back into contact with the thing.

Instantly, it ceased. The room resumed its normal features and proportions. The men looked at each other. Not a hair was out of place. Leonardo’s eyeglasses were still on his nose. The Apple sat on the table inert, a plain little object that few would have given a second glance to.

Leonardo was the first to speak. ‘This must *never* fall into the wrong hands,’ he said. ‘It would drive weaker minds insane…’

‘I agree,’ said Machiavelli. ‘I could hardly stand it, hardly believe its power. Carefully, after putting on gloves, he picked up the Apple and repacked it in its box, sealing the lid securely.

‘Do you think the Spaniard knows what this thing does? Do you think he can control it?’

‘He must *never* have it,’ said Machiavelli in a voice of granite. He handed the box to Ezio. ‘You must take charge of this and protect it with all the skills we have taught you.’

Ezio took the box carefully from him and nodded.

‘Take it to Forlì,’ Mario said. ‘The citadel there is walled, protected by cannon, and it is in the hands of one of our greatest allies.’

‘And who is that?’ asked Ezio.

‘Her name is Caterina Sforza.’

Ezio smiled. ‘I remember now… an old acquaintance, and one which I shall be happy to renew.’

‘Then make your preparations to leave.’

‘I will accompany you,’ said Machiavelli.

‘I shall be grateful for that,’ Ezio smiled. He turned to Leonardo. ‘And what about you, *amico mio*?’

‘Me? When my work here is done I’ll return to Milan. The Duke there is good to me.’

‘You must come to Monteriggioni too, when you’re next in Florence and have time,’ said Mario.

Ezio looked at his best friend. ‘Goodbye, Leonardo. I hope our paths cross again one day.’

‘I am sure they will,’ said Leonardo. ‘And if you need me, Agniolo in Florence will always know where to find me.’

Ezio embraced him. ‘Farewell.’

‘A parting gift,’ said Leonardo, handing him a bag. ‘Bullets and powder for your little *pistola*, and a nice big phial of poison for that useful dagger of yours. I hope you won’t need them, but it’s important to me to know that you’re as well protected as possible.

Ezio looked at him with emotion. ‘Thank you – thank you for everything, my oldest friend.’

22

After a long, uneventful journey by galley from Venice, Ezio and Machiavelli arrived at the wetlands port near Ravenna, where they were met by Caterina herself and some of her entourage.

‘They sent me word by courier that you were on your way, so I thought I’d come down and accompany you back to Forlì myself,’ she said. ‘You were wise, I think, to make the journey in one of Doge Agostino’s galleys, for the roads are often unsafe and we have trouble with brigands. Not, I think,’ she added, casting an appreciative eye over Ezio, ‘that they would have given *you* much trouble.’

‘I am honoured that you remember me, *Signora*.’

‘Well, it has been a long time, but you certainly make an impression.’ She turned to Machiavelli. ‘It’s good to see you again too, Niccolò.’

‘You two know each other?’asked Ezio.

‘Niccolò’s been able to advise me… on certain matters of state.’ She changed the subject. ‘And now I hear that you’ve become a fully fledged Assassin. Congratulations.’

They’d arrived at Caterina’s carriage but she told her servants that she preferred to ride, it being a delightful day and the distance not great. The horses were duly saddled and after they had mounted Caterina bade Ezio ride beside her.

‘You’re going to love Forlì. And you will be safe there. Our cannon have protected the city well for over a century and the citadel is all but impregnable.’

‘Forgive me, *Signora*, but there is one thing which intrigues me –’

‘Please tell me what it is.’

‘I’ve never heard of a woman ruling a city-state before. I am impressed.’

Caterina smiled. ‘Well, it was in my husband’s hands before, of course. Do you remember him? A little? Girolamo.’ She paused. ‘Well, he died –’

‘I am so sorry.’

‘Don’t be,’ she said simply. ‘I had him assassinated.’

Ezio tried to conceal his amazement.

‘It was like this,’ put in Machiavelli. ‘We found out that Girolamo Riario was working for the Templars. He was in the process of completing a map which shows the locations of the remaining unretrieved Codex pages –’

‘I never liked the goddamned son-of-a-bitch, anyway,’ said Caterina flatly. ‘He was a lousy father, boring in bed, and a general all-round pain in the arse.’ She paused reflectively. ‘Mind you, I’ve had a couple of other husbands since – rather overrated, if you ask me.’

They were interrupted by the sight of a riderless horse coming towards them at the gallop. Caterina dispatched one of her outriders to go after it, and the rest of the party carried on towards Forlì, but now the Sforza retainers had their swords drawn. Soon they came upon an overturned wagon, its wheels still spinning in the air, surrounded by dead bodies.

Caterina’s brow darkened, and she spurred her horse on, closely followed by Ezio and Machiavelli.

A little further down the road, they encountered a group of local peasants, some wounded, making their way towards them.

‘What’s going on?’ Caterina accosted a woman at the head of the group.

‘*Altezza*,’ said the woman, tears pouring down her face. ‘They came almost as soon as you had left. They’re preparing to lay siege to the city!’

‘Who are?’

‘The Orsi brothers, *Madonna*!’

‘*Sangue di Giuda!*’

‘Who are the Orsi?’ asked Ezio.

‘The same bastards I hired to kill Girolamo,’ spat Caterina.

‘The Orsi work for anyone who’ll pay them,’ observed Machiavelli. ‘They’re not very bright, but unfortunately they have a reputation for getting a job done.’ He paused in thought. ‘The Spaniard’ll be behind this.’

‘But how could he possibly know where we were taking the Apple?’

‘They’re not looking for the Apple, Ezio; they’re after Riario’s Map. The Map is still in Forlì. Rodrigo needs to know where the other Codex pages are concealed, and we cannot afford to let him get his hands on the Map!’

‘Never mind the Map,’ cried Caterina. ‘My children are in the city. Ah, *porco demonio*!’

They kicked their horses into a gallop until they came within sight of the town. Smoke was rising from within the walls and they could see the city gates were closed. Men stood along the outer ramparts under the bear-and-bush crest of the Orsi family. But inside the town, the citadel on its hill still flew the flag of the Sforza.

'It looks as if they've gained control of at least part of Forlì, but not the citadel,' said Machiavelli.

'Double-crossing bastards!' spat Caterina.

'Is there a way I can get into the city without their seeing me?' asked Ezio, gathering up his Codex weapons and strapping them on in readiness, keeping the gun and the spring-blade in his satchel.

'There's a possibility, *caro*,' said Caterina. 'But it'll be hard. There's an old tunnel that leads under the western wall from the canal.'

'Then I'll try,' said Ezio. 'Be ready. If I can get the city gates open from the inside, be prepared to ride like hell. If we can reach the citadel and your people there see your crest and let you in, we'll be safe enough to plan the next move.'

'Which will be to string these cretins up and watch them dangle in the wind,' growled Caterina. 'But go on, Ezio, and good luck! I'll think of something to distract the Orsi troops' attention.'

Ezio dismounted and ran round to the western walls, keeping low and taking cover behind hillocks and bushes. Meanwhile Caterina stood up in her stirrups and bawled at the enemy within the city walls: 'Hey, you! I'm talking to *you*, you spineless *dogs*. You occupy *my* city? *My* home? And you really think I'm going to do nothing about it? Why, I'm coming up there to rip off your *coglioni* – if you've got any, that is!'

Groups of soldiers had appeared on the ramparts now, looking across at Caterina, half-amused, half-intimidated as she kept it up: 'What kind of men are you? Doing the bidding of your paymasters for handfuls of loose change! I wonder if you'll think it was worth it after I've come up there, cut your heads off, pissed down your necks and shoved your faces up my *figa*! I'll stick your balls on a fork and roast them over my kitchen fire! How does *that* sound?'

By now there were no men on watch along the western ramparts. Ezio found the canal unguarded, and, swimming down it, he located the overgrown entrance of the tunnel. Slipping out of the water, he plunged into the tunnel's black depths.

It was well maintained inside, and dry, and all he had to do was follow it until he saw light at its other end. He approached it cautiously, and as he did so Caterina's voice came to him again. The tunnel ended in a short flight of stone steps which led up into a back room on the ground floor of one of the western

towers of Forlì. It was deserted, Caterina had collected quite a crowd. Through a window he could see most of the Orsi troops' backs, as they watched, and even occasionally applauded, Caterina's performance.

'… if I were a man I'd wipe those grins off your faces! But don't think I won't give it my best shot anyway. Don't be misled by the fact that I've got tits –' A thought struck her. 'I bet you'd like to see them, wouldn't you? I bet you wish you could touch them, lick them, give 'em a squeeze! Well, why don't you come down here and try? I'd kick your balls so hard they'd fly out through your nostrils! *Luridi branco di cani bastardi!* You'd better pack up and go home while you still can – if you don't want to be impaled and stuck up all along my citadel walls! Ah! But maybe I'm wrong! Maybe you'd actually *enjoy* having a long oaken pole up your arses! You disgust me – I even begin to wonder if you're worth the bother. I've never seen such a piss-poor shower of shite. *Che vista penosa!* I can't see that it'd make much difference to you as *men* even if I had you castrated.'

By now Ezio was in the street. He could see the gate closest to where Caterina and Machiavelli were located. At the top of its arch a bowman stood by the heavy lever which operated it. Moving as silently and as quickly as he could, he shinned up to the top of the arch and stabbed the soldier once in the neck, dispatching him instantly. Then he threw all his weight on to the lever, and the gates below swung open with a mighty groan.

Machiavelli had been watching carefully all this time, and as soon as he saw the gates opening, he leant over and spoke softly to Caterina, who immediately spurred her horse forward at a frantic gallop, closely followed by Machiavelli and the rest of her entourage. As soon as they saw what was happening, the Orsi troops on the ramparts let out a yell of anger and started to swarm down to intercept, but the Sforza faction was too quick for them. Ezio seized the bow and arrows from the dead guard and used them to fell three Orsi men before he swiftly climbed a nearby wall and started to run over the city's rooftops, keeping pace with Caterina and her group as they rode through the narrow streets towards the citadel.

The deeper they went into the city, the greater was the confusion that reigned. It was clear that the battle for control of Forlì was far from over, as knots of soldiers under the banner of the blue snakes and black eagles of the Sforza fought the Orsi mercenaries, as ordinary citizens rushed for shelter in their houses or simply ran aimlessly hither and yon in the confusion. Market-stalls were overturned, chickens ran squawking underfoot, a small child sat in the mud and bawled for its mother, who ran out and snatched it to safety; and all around the noise of battle roared. Ezio, leaping from roof to roof, could see something

of the lie of the land from his vantage-point, and used his arrows with deadly accuracy to protect Caterina and Machiavelli whenever Orsi guards got too close to them.

At last, they arrived in a broad piazza in front of the citadel. It was empty, and the streets leading off it appeared deserted. Ezio descended and rejoined his people. There was nobody on the citadel's battlements, and its massive gate was firmly closed. It looked every bit as impregnable as Caterina had said it was.

She looked up, and cried: 'Open up, you bloody parcel of fools! It's me! *La Duchessa*! Get your arses in gear!'

Now some of her men in the citadel did appear above them, among them a captain who said, '*Subito*, *Altezza*!' and issued orders to three men who disappeared immediately to open the gate. But at that instant, howling for blood, dozens of Orsi troops poured from the surrounding streets into the square, blocking any retreat and pinning Caterina's company between them and the unforgiving wall of the citadel.

'Bloody ambush!' shouted Machiavelli, with Ezio rallying their own handful of men, and keeping between Caterina and their enemies.

'*Aprite la porta! Aprite!*' yelled Caterina. And at last the mighty gates swung open. Sforza guards rushed out to aid them, and, slashing at the Orsi in vicious hand-to-hand fighting, beat a retreat back through the gates, which quickly slammed shut behind them. Ezio and Machiavelli (who had quickly dismounted) both leaned against the wall, side by side and breathing hard. They could scarcely believe that they had made it. Caterina dismounted too, but didn't rest for an instant. Instead she ran across the inner courtyard to a doorway in which two little boys and a wet-nurse holding a baby were waiting fearfully.

The children ran to her and she embraced them, greeting them by name, 'Cesare, Giovanni – *no preoccuparvi*.' She stroked the baby's head, cooing, '*Salute*, Galeazzo.' Then she looked around, and at the wet-nurse.

'Nezetta! Where are Bianca and Ottaviano?'

'Forgive me, my lady. They were playing outside when the attack began and we haven't been able to find them since.'

Caterina, looking frightened, was about to reply when suddenly a huge roar went up from the Orsi troops outside the citadel. The Sforza captain came rushing up to Ezio and Machiavelli. 'They're bringing in reinforcements from the mountains,' he reported. 'I don't know how long we'll be able to hold out.' He turned to a lieutenant. 'To the battlements! Man the cannon!'

The lieutenant rushed off to organize gun-crews, and these were hurrying to their positions when a hail of arrows fired by Orsi archers started to descend on the inner courtyard and the ramparts above. Caterina hustled her younger

children to safety, shouting to Ezio at the same time, ‘Look after the cannon! They’re our only hope! Don’t let those bastards breach the citadel!’

‘Come!’ shouted Machiavelli. Ezio followed him up to where the cannon were ranged.

Several of the gun-crews were dead, along with the captain and the lieutenant. Others were wounded. The survivors were struggling to trim and angle the heavy cannon to bring them to bear on the Orsi men in the square below. Huge numbers of reinforcements had come up, and Ezio could see that they were manhandling siege-engines and catapults through the streets. Meanwhile, directly below, a contingent of Orsi troops were bringing up a battering-ram. If he and Machiavelli didn’t think of something quickly there would be no chance of saving the citadel, but to withstand this new assault he would have to fire the cannon at targets within the walls of Forlì itself, and so risk injuring or even killing some of its innocent citizens. Leaving Machiavelli to organize the gunners, he raced down to the courtyard and sought out Caterina.

‘They are storming the city. To keep them at bay I must fire the cannon at targets within its walls.’

She looked at him with steely calm. ‘Then do what you must do.’

He looked up to the ramparts where Machiavelli stood, waiting for the signal. Ezio raised his arm, and lowered it decisively.

The cannon roared, and even as they did so Ezio was flying back up to the ramparts where they were located. Directing the gunners to fire at will, he watched as first one siege-engine and then another was blown to bits, as well as the catapults. There was little room for the Orsi troops to manoeuvre in the narrow streets and after the cannon had wreaked their havoc, Sforza archers and crossbowmen began to pick off the surviving invaders within the city walls. At last, the remaining Orsi troops had been driven out of Forlì altogether, and those Sforza troops who had survived outside the citadel itself were able to secure the outer curtain walls. But the victory had come at a cost. Several houses within the city were smouldering ruins, and in order to win it back, Caterina’s gunners had not been able to avoid killing some of their own people. And there was something else to consider, as Machiavelli was quick to point out. They had flushed the enemy out of the city, but they had not raised the siege. Forlì was still surrounded by Orsi battalions, cut off from supplies of fresh food and water; and Caterina’s two older children were still out there somewhere, at risk.

Some little time later, Caterina, Machiavelli and Ezio were standing on the ramparts of the outer walls surveying the host encamped around them. Behind them, the citizens of Forlì were doing their best to put the city back in order, but food and water wouldn’t last for ever and everyone knew it. Caterina was

haggard, worried to death about her missing children – Bianca, the older, was nine, and Ottaviano a year younger.

They had yet to encounter the Orsi brothers themselves, but that very day a herald appeared at the centre of the enemy army and blew a clarion call. The troops parted like the sea to allow two men riding chestnut horses and dressed in chain-steel hauberks to pass between them, accompanied by pages bearing the crest of the bear-and-bush. They reined in well out of arrow range.

One of the horsemen stood up in his stirrups and raised his voice. 'Caterina! Caterina Sforza! We think you are still cooped up in your dear little city, Caterina – so answer me!'

Caterina leant over the battlements, a wild expression on her face. 'What do you want?'

The man grinned broadly. 'Oh, nothing. I was just wondering if you were missing… any children!'

Ezio had taken up a position at Caterina's side. The man who was speaking looked up at him in surprise. 'Well, well,' he said. 'Ezio Auditore, if I am not mistaken. How pleasant to meet you. One has heard so much about you.'

'And you, I take it, are the *fratelli* Orsi,' Ezio said.

The one who had not yet spoken raised a hand. 'The same. Lodovico –'

'– and Checco,' said the other. 'At your service!' He gave a dry laugh.

'*Basta!*' cried Caterina. 'Enough of this! Where are my *children*? Let them *go*!'

Lodovico bowed ironically in the saddle. '*Ma certo, Signora*. We'll happily give them back. In exchange for something of yours. Something, rather, that belonged to your late lamented husband. Something he was working on, on behalf of… some friends of ours.' His voice suddenly hardened. 'I mean a certain Map!'

'And a certain Apple, too,' added Checco. 'Oh yes, we know all about that. Do you think we are fools? Do you think our employer doesn't have spies?'

'Yes,' said Lodovico. 'We'll have the Apple too. Or shall I slice your little ones' throats from ear to ear and send them to join their pappa?'

Caterina stood listening. Her mood had changed to one of icy calm. When her turn came to speak, she cried, '*Bastardi!* You think you can intimidate me with your vulgar threats? You scum! I'll give you *nothing*! You want my children? Take them! I have the means to make more!' And she raised her skirts to show them her vagina.

'I'm not interested in your histrionics, Caterina,' said Checco, wheeling his horse around. 'And I'm not interested in staring at your *figa* either. You'll change your mind, but we're only giving you an hour. Your brats will be safe

enough until then in that slummy little village of yours just down the road. And don't forget – we *will* kill them and then we *will* come back and smash your city and take what we want by force – so you just take advantage of our generosity and we can all save ourselves a lot of bother.'

And the brothers rode off. Caterina collapsed against the rough wall of the rampart, breathing heavily through her mouth, in shock at what she'd just said and done.

Ezio was by her side. 'You're not going to sacrifice your children, Caterina. No Cause could ever be worth that.'

'To save the world?' She looked at him, lips parted, pale blue eyes wide under her mane of red hair.

'We cannot become people like them,' said Ezio simply. 'There are some compromises which cannot be made.'

'Oh, Ezio! That is what I expected you to say!' She flung her arms round his neck. 'Of course we can't sacrifice them, my darling!' She stood back. 'But I cannot ask you to take the risk of getting them back for me.'

'Try me,' said Ezio. He turned to Machiavelli. 'I won't be gone long – I hope. But whatever happens to me, I know you will guard the Apple with your life. And Caterina –'

'Yes?'

'Do you know where Girolamo hid the Map?'

'I'll find it.'

'Do so, and protect it.'

'And what will you do about the Orsi?' asked Machiavelli.

'They are already added to my list,' said Ezio. 'They belong to the company of men who killed my kinsmen and destroyed my family. But I now see that there is a greater Cause to be served than mere revenge.' The two men shook hands and their eyes locked.

'*Buona fortuna, amico mio,*' said Machiavelli sternly.

'*Buona fortuna anche.*'

It wasn't hard to reach the village whose identity Checco had so carelessly given away, even if his description of it as a slum had been a little ungracious. It was small and poor, like most serf-villages in the Romagna, and it showed signs of having recently been flooded by its nearby river; but on the whole it was neat and clean, the houses roughly whitewashed and the thatch new. Although the water-logged road that divided the dozen or so houses was still mired from the flood, everything suggested order, if not contentment, and industry, if not happiness. The only thing which distinguished Santa Salvaza from a peacetime

village was that it was peppered with Orsi men-at-arms. No wonder, mused Ezio, that Checco thought he could afford to mention where he was holding Bianca and Ottaviano. The next question was, where exactly in the village might Caterina's children be located?

Ezio, having armed himself this time with the double-blade on his left forearm with his metal arm-guard, and the *pistola* on his right, as well as a light arming-sword hung from his belt, was dressed simply in a peasant's woollen cloak which hung down below his knees. He pulled his hood up to avoid recognition, and, dismounting some way outside the village and keeping a weather-eye out for Orsi scouts, he slung a fardel of kindling borrowed from an outhouse on to his back. Stooping beneath it, he made his way into Santa Salvaza.

The residents of the village tried to go about their business as they normally did, despite the military presence that had been foisted on to them. Naturally, no one was particularly enamoured of the Orsi mercenaries, and Ezio, unnoticed by the latter but almost instantly recognized as a stranger by the locals, was able to gain their support in his mission. He made his way to a house at the end of the village, larger than the others and set slightly apart. It was there, he'd been told by an old woman carrying water from the river, that one of the children was being held. Ezio was grateful that the Orsi soldiery was pretty thinly spread. Most of the force were busy laying siege to Forlì.

But he knew he had very little time to rescue the children.

The door and windows of the house were firmly shut, but as he made his way round the back, where two wings of the building formed a courtyard, Ezio heard a young, firm voice delivering a severe lecture. He climbed on to the roof and peered down into the courtyard, where Bianca Sforza, the miniature image of her mother, was giving two surly Orsi guardsmen a dressing-down.

'Are you two sorry-looking specimens all they could rustle up to guard me?' she was saying regally, drawn up to her full height and showing as little fear as her mother would have done. '*Stolti!* It won't be enough! My mamma is fierce and would never let you hurt me. We Sforza women are no shrinking violets, you know! We may look pretty to the eye, but the eyes deceive. As my pappa found out!' She drew breath, and the guards looked at each other nonplussed. 'I hope you don't imagine I'm scared of you either, because if you did you'd be very much mistaken. And if you touch one hair of my little brother's head, my mamma will hunt you down and eat you for breakfast! *Capito*?'

'Just button it, you little fool,' growled the older of the guards. 'Unless you want a clip round the ear!'

'Don't you dare talk to me like that! In any case, it's absurd. You'll never get away with this, and I'll be safe at home within the hour. In fact, I'm getting

bored. I'm surprised you don't have anything better to do, while I wait for you to die!'

'All right, that's quite enough,' said the older guard, reaching out to grab her. But at that moment Ezio fired his *pistola* from the rooftop, hitting the soldier squarely in the chest. The man was launched from his feet – crimson blossoming through his tunic even before he hit the ground. Ezio mused for a second that Leonardo's powder mix must be improving. In the flurry of confusion that followed the guard's sudden death, Ezio leapt down from the rooftop, landing with the grace and power of a panther, and with his double-blades quickly rounded on the younger guard, who fumbled in drawing an ugly-looking dagger. Ezio slashed precisely at the man's forearm, shearing through tendons as though they were ribbons. The man's dagger dropped to the ground, sticking point first in the mud – and before he could muster any further defence, Ezio had brought the double-blade under his jaw, stabbing through the soft tissue of the mouth and tongue, into the cavity of the skull. Ezio calmly withdrew the blades, leaving the corpse to slump to the ground.

'Are they the only two?' he asked the undismayed Bianca as he quickly reloaded.

'Yes! And thank you, whoever you are. My mother will see that you are amply rewarded. But they've got my brother Ottaviano too –'

'Do you know where he is?' asked Ezio, swiftly reloading his pistol.

'They've got him in the watchtower – by the ruined bridge! We must hurry!'

'Show me where, and stay very close!'

He followed her out of the house and along the road until they came upon the tower. They were just in time, for there was Lodovico himself, dragging the whimpering Ottaviano along by the scruff of his neck. Ezio could see that the little boy was limping – he must have twisted his ankle.

'You!' shouted Lodovico when he saw Ezio. 'You'd better hand the girl over and go back to your mistress – tell her we'll finish the pair of them if we don't get what we want!'

'I want my mamma,' bawled Ottaviano. 'Let me go you, you big thug!'

'Shut up, *marmocchio*!' Lodovico snarled at him. 'Ezio! Go fetch the Apple and the Map or the kid gets it.'

'I need to pee!' wailed Ottaviano.

'Oh, for God's sake, *chiudi il becco*!'

'Let him go,' said Ezio firmly.

'I'd like to see you make me! You'll never get close enough, you fool! The minute you make a move, I'll slit his throat as easily as winking!'

Lodovico had dragged the little boy in front of him with both hands, but now had to free one hand in order to draw his sword. At that moment Ottaviano tried to break free, but Lodovico grasped him firmly by the wrist. Nevertheless, Ottaviano was no longer between Lodovico and Ezio. Seeing his opportunity, Ezio sprang out his pistol and fired.

Lodovico's enraged expression was transformed to one of disbelief. The ball had hit him in the neck – cutting the jugular. His eyes goggling, he let go of Ottaviano and sank to his knees, clutching his throat – the blood seeping through his fingers. The boy ran forward to be embraced by his sister.

'Ottaviano! *Stai bene*!' she said, hugging him close.

Ezio moved forward to stand over Lodovico, but not too close. The man hadn't fallen yet and his sword was still in his hand. Blood oozed down on to his jerkin, a trickle becoming a torrent.

'I don't know what Devil's instrument has given you the means to get the better of me, Ezio,' he panted. 'But I am sorry to tell you that you will lose this game whatever you do. We Orsi are not the fools you seem to take us for. If anyone is a fool, you are – you and Caterina!'

'You are the fool,' said Ezio, his voice cold with scorn, 'To die for a bagful of silver. Do you really think it was worth it?'

Lodovico grimaced. 'More than you know, friend. You've been outwitted. And whatever you do now, the Master will gain his prize!' His face contorted in agony at the pain from his wound. The bloodstain had spread. 'You'd better finish me, Ezio, if you have any mercy in you at all.'

'Then die with your pride, Orsi. It means nothing.' Ezio stepped forward and further opened the wound in Lodovico's neck. An instant later, he was no more. Ezio stooped over him and closed his eyes. '*Requiescat in pace*,' he said.

But there was no time to be lost. He returned to the children, who had been watching wide-eyed. 'Can you walk?' he asked Ottaviano.

'I'll try, but it hurts terribly.'

Ezio knelt and looked. The ankle wasn't twisted, but sprained. He lifted Ottaviano on to his shoulders. 'Courage, little *Duce*,' he said. 'I'll get you both home safe.'

'Can I have a pee first? I really do need to.'

'Be quick.'

Ezio knew it wouldn't be an easy matter to get the children back through the village. It was impossible to disguise them, as they were gorgeously dressed, and in any case by now Bianca's escape would surely have been discovered. He exchanged the gun on his wrist for the poison-blade, putting the wrist mechanism in his pack. Taking Bianca's right hand in his left, he made for the

woods that skirted the western side of the village. Climbing a low hill, he was able to look down on Santa Salvaza and saw Orsi troops running in the direction of the watchtower, but none seemed to have deployed in the woods. Grateful for the respite, and after what seemed an age, he arrived with the children back where he had tethered his horse, placed them on its back and got up behind them.

Then he rode back north to Forlì. The city looked quiet. Too quiet. And where were the Orsi forces? Had they raised the siege? It didn't seem possible. He spurred his horse on.

'Take the southern bridge, *Messere*,' said Bianca, in front, holding on to the saddle's pommel. 'It's the most direct way home from here.'

Ottaviano nestled against him.

As they approached the walls of the town, he saw the southern gates open. Out came a small troop of Sforza guards, escorting Caterina and, close behind her, Machiavelli. Ezio could see at once that his fellow Assassin had been wounded. He urged his mount forwards, and when he reached the others, swiftly dismounted and passed the children into Caterina's waiting arms.

'What in the name of the Blessed Virgin is going on?' he asked, looking from Caterina to Machiavelli and back again. 'What are you doing out here?'

'Oh, Ezio,' said Caterina. 'I'm so sorry, so sorry!'

'What's *happened*?'

'The whole thing was a trick. To lower our defences!' Caterina said despairingly. 'Taking the children was a diversion!'

Ezio turned his glance back to Machiavelli. 'But the city is safe?' he said.

Machiavelli sighed. 'Yes, the city is safe. The Orsi no longer have an interest in it.'

'What do you mean?'

'After we'd driven them out, we relaxed – only momentarily, to regroup and see to our wounded. It was then that Checco counter-attacked. They must have planned the whole thing! He stormed the city. I fought him man-to-man and hard, but his soldiers came on me from behind and overwhelmed me. Ezio, now I must ask you to show courage: for Checco has taken the Apple!'

Ezio was stunned for a long moment. Then he said slowly, 'What? No – that cannot be.' He looked around wildly. 'Where has he gone?'

'As soon as he had what he wanted, he beat a retreat with his men, and the army split up. We couldn't see which group had the Apple, and we were too battle-weary to give effective chase anyway. But Checco himself led a company into the mountains to the west –'

‘Then all is lost?’ Ezio cried, thinking that Lodovico had been right – he had underestimated the Orsi.

‘We still have the Map, thank God,’ said Caterina. ‘He didn’t dare spend too much time searching for it.’

‘But what if, now he has the Apple, he no longer *needs* the Map?’

‘The Templars cannot be allowed to triumph,’ said Machiavelli, grimly. ‘They cannot! We must go!’

But Ezio could see that his friend had turned grey from his wounds. ‘No – you stay here. Caterina! Tend to him. I must leave now! There may yet be time!’

23

It took a long time for Ezio, riding by day and taking what little rest he could when changing his horse, to arrive in the Appenines, and when he did, he knew the search for Checco Orsi would take him even longer. But he also knew that if Checco had returned to his family's seat at Nubilaria, he would be able to cut him off on the road that led from there south on the long, winding route it took to Rome. There was no guarantee that Checco wouldn't have gone directly to the Holy See, but Ezio thought that with such a precious cargo as the Apple, his adversary would first seek safety where he was known, and from there send couriers to establish whether the Spaniard had returned to the Vatican before making contact with him there.

Ezio therefore decided to take the Nubilaria road himself, and, entering the town in secret, set about discovering what he could about Checco's whereabouts. But Checco's own spies were everywhere, and it wasn't long before Ezio learned that Checco was aware that he was closing in, and was planning to take off in a caravan of two carriages with the Apple, in order to escape from him and foil his plans.

On the morning Checco planned to depart, Ezio was ready, keeping a close watch on the southern gates of Nubilaria, and soon the two carriages he'd been expecting rumbled out through them. Ezio mounted his horse to give chase, but at the last moment a third, lighter carriage, driven by an Orsi henchman, came fast out of a side street and deliberately blocked Ezio's path, causing his horse to rear and throw him. With no time to waste, Ezio was obliged to abandon his steed, and, jumping up, clambered on to the Orsi carriage, felling its driver with a single blow and throwing him to the ground. He whipped up the horses and gave chase.

It wasn’t long before he had his adversary’s vehicles in sight, but they saw him too and increased their speed. As they pelted down the treacherous mountain road, Checco’s escort-carriage, filled with Orsi soldiers who were preparing to fire their crossbows at Ezio, took a corner too fast. The horses broke their traces and raced on round the bend ahead, but the carriage, its steering-gear gone and its hafts empty, shot straight on over the edge of the road and crashed hundreds of feet into the valley below. Under his breath, Ezio thanked fate for her kindness. He urged his own horses on, worried that he would drive them too hard and cause their hearts to burst, but they were pulling less weight than the animals pulling Checco’s carriage and steadily made up the distance that separated Ezio from his quarry.

As Ezio drew level, the Orsi coachman struck out at him with his whip, but Ezio caught it in his hand and pulled it free. Then, when the right moment came, he let go of his own reins and leapt from his carriage to the roof of Checco’s. In panic, the horses of his carriage, relieved of both the weight and the control of a driver, bolted, and careered out of sight down the road ahead of them.

‘Get the hell off!’ yelled Checco’s driver, alarmed. ‘What in God’s name do you think you are doing? Are you crazy?’ But without his whip, he was finding it harder to control his own team of horses. He had no leisure to fight.

From inside the carriage, Checco himself was shouting, ‘Don’t be a fool, Ezio! You’ll never get out of this!’ Leaning half out of the window, he lunged at Ezio with his sword while the coachman frantically tried to control the horses. ‘Get off my carriage, *now*!’

The driver tried deliberately swerving the carriage to throw Ezio off, but he clung on for dear life. The carriage veered dangerously and, at last, as they were passing a disused marble quarry, it ran completely out of control, crashing on to its side and throwing the driver heavily on to a pile of slabs of marble of all sizes that had been sawn out by the masons and then abandoned owing to faults that ran through the stone. The horses were pulled down in their traces, pawing the ground in frantic terror. Ezio jumped clear, landed in a crouch, and had his sword out ready for Checco, who, winded but unhurt, was clambering out, fury in his face.

‘Give me the Apple, Checco. It’s all over.’

‘Imbecile! It’ll be *over* when you’re *dead* !’ Checco swung his sword at his opponent, and immediately they were cutting and slashing at each other dangerously close to the edge of the road.

‘Give me the Apple, Checco, and I’ll let you go. You have no idea of the power of what you have!’

‘You’ll never have it. And when my Master does, he will have undreamed-of power, and Lodovico and I will be there to enjoy our share of it!’

‘Lodovico is dead! And do you really think your Master will let you live, once your usefulness to him is over? You already know too much!’

‘You killed my brother? Then *this* is for you, for his sake!’ Checco rushed at him.

They closed, blades flashing, and Checco struck at Ezio again, his sword deflected by the metal arm-guard. The fact that his well-aimed blow had not struck home momentarily put Checco off his guard, but he quickly recovered and struck a blow at Ezio’s right arm, cutting deeply into his bicep and causing him to let his weapon fall.

Checco gave a hoarse cry of triumph. He held the point of his sword at Ezio’s throat. ‘Don’t beg for mercy,’ he said, ‘for I’ll give you none.’ And he drew back his arm to drive in the fatal blow. At that instant, Ezio unleashed the double-bladed dagger from its mechanism on his left forearm and, swinging round with lightning speed, rammed it into Checco’s chest.

Checco stood stock still for a long moment, looking down at the blood dripping on to the white roadway. He dropped his sword and fell against Ezio, clutching on to him for support. Their faces were close. Checco smiled. ‘So, you have your prize again,’ he whispered, as the life-blood pumped out faster from his chest.

‘Was it really worth it?’ asked Ezio. ‘So much carnage!’

The man gave what sounded like a chuckle, or it might have been a cough, as more blood flooded his mouth: ‘Look, Ezio, you know how hard it will be for you to hold on to a thing of such value for long.’ He fought for breath. ‘I am dying today, but it will be *you* who dies tomorrow.’ And as the expression faded from his face and his eyes rolled upwards, his body sank to the ground at Ezio’s feet.

‘We shall see, my friend,’ Ezio told him. ‘Rest in peace.’

He felt groggy. Blood was pouring from the wound in his arm, but he made himself walk to the carriage and calmed the horses, cutting them free of their traces. Then he searched the interior and quickly located the teak box. Opening it quickly to ensure that its contents were safe, he reclasped it shut again and tucked it firmly under his good arm. He glanced across the quarry, where the driver lay inert. It wasn’t necessary to verify that the man was dead, for the broken angle of the body told him everything.

The horses had not moved far, and Ezio went over to them, wondering if he had the strength to mount one and use it at least to get him part of the way back to Forlì. He hoped he would find everything there as he had left it, for his tracing

of Checco had taken far longer than he'd hoped or expected. But he had never pretended that his work would be easy, and the Apple was back in Assassin control. The time he had spent had not been in vain.

He looked at the horses again, deciding that the lead-beast would be his best choice of the four. He went to put his hand on its mane, to pull himself up, for it was not equipped with riding tack, but as he did so he staggered.

He had lost more blood than he'd thought. He would have to bind up his wound somehow before he did anything else. He tethered the horse to a tree, and cut a strip from Checco's shirt to use as a bandage. Then he dragged the body out of sight. If anyone came by, they would assume, if they did not look too carefully, that Ezio and the driver had been the victims of a tragic road accident. But it was getting late, and there would be few travellers abroad at this hour.

However, the effort drained the last of his resources. Even I have to rest, he thought, and the thought was a sweet one. He sat down in the shade of the tree and listened to the sound of the horse as it gently grazed. He placed the teak box on the ground beside him, and took one last cautious look round, for this was the last place he should remain for long; but his eyelids were heavy, and he did not see the silent watcher concealed by a tree on the knoll which rose above the road behind him.

When Ezio awoke, darkness had fallen, but there was just enough moonlight for him to see a figure moving silently near him.

Ezio's right bicep ached dully, but when he tried to raise himself with his good left arm, he found he could not move it. Someone had brought a slab of marble from the quarry and used it to pin the arm down. He struggled, using his legs to try to stand, but he could not. He looked down to where he had left the box containing the Apple.

It was gone.

The figure, who was dressed, Ezio saw, in the black *cappa* and white habit of a Dominican monk, had noticed him wake, and turned to him, adjusting the marble slab so that it held him more securely. Ezio noticed that a finger was missing from one of the monk's hands.

'Wait!' he said. 'Who are you? What are you doing?'

The monk didn't reply. Ezio could see the box as the monk stooped to pick it up again. 'Don't touch that! Whatever you do, don't –'

But the monk opened the box, and a light as bright as the sun shone forth.

Ezio thought he heard the monk give a sigh of satisfaction, before he passed out again.

When he woke again, it was morning. The horses were all gone, but with daylight, some of his strength had returned. He looked at the marble slab. It felt heavy, but it did move slightly when his arm moved under it. He looked around. Just within reach of his right hand he could see a stout branch that must have fallen from the tree at some point in the past but which was still green enough to be strong. Gritting his teeth, he picked it up and manoeuvred it under the slab. His right arm hurt like hell and started to bleed again as he wedged one end of the branch under the slab and heaved. A half-forgotten line from his schooldays had flashed through his mind: *Give me a lever long enough, and I will lift the earth*… He pushed hard. The slab started to move, but then his strength failed him and it fell back into place again. He lay back, rested, and tried again.

At the third attempt, screaming inwardly with pain, and thinking the muscles of his wounded right arm would tear through the skin, he pushed again, as if his very life depended on it, and, finally, the slab rolled over on to the ground.

Gingerly, he sat up. His left arm was sore, but nothing was broken.

Why the monk had not killed him as he slept, he had no idea. Perhaps murder was not part of the Man of God's plan. But one thing was certain – the Dominican, and the Apple, were gone.

Dragging himself to his feet, he found his way to a nearby stream and drank thirstily before bathing his wound and redressing it. Then he set off eastwards, back over the mountains towards Forlì.

At last, after a journey of many days, he saw the towers of the town in the distance. But he was tired, drained by his unremitting task, by his failure, by his loneliness. On the journey back he had had plenty of time to think about Cristina and what might have been, had he not been given this Cross to bear. But since he had, he could not change his life; nor, as he realized, would he.

He had reached the far end of the bridge to the southern gate and was close enough to see people on the battlements when exhaustion finally overcame him, and he passed out.

When he next awoke, it was to find himself lying in a bed, covered in pristine linen sheets, out on a sunny terrace shaded by vines. A cool hand stroked his forehead, and pressed a beaker of water to his lips.

'Ezio! Thank God you are back with us. Are you all right? What happened to you?' The questions flowed from Caterina's mouth with all her usual impetuosity.

'I… I don't know…'

'They saw you from the ramparts. I came out personally. You had been travelling for I don't know how long, and you have a horrific wound.'

Ezio struggled with his memory. ‘Something is coming back to me now… I had retrieved the Apple from Checco… but there was another man who came soon afterwards – he took the Apple!’

‘Who?’

‘He wore a black hood, like a monk – and I think… had a finger missing!’ Ezio struggled to sit up. ‘How long have I been lying here? I have to go – right away!’ he started to rise, but it was as if his limbs were made of lead, and as he moved, a terrible dizziness overcame him, so he was obliged to lie back again.

‘Whoa! What did that monk do to me?’

Caterina leaned over him. ‘You can’t go anywhere yet, Ezio. Even you need time to recover if you are to fight the battles well which lie ahead; and I can see a long and arduous journey in front of you. But cheer up! Niccolò has returned to Florence. He will look after matters there. And your other fellow Assassins are vigilant. So stay a while…’ She kissed his forehead, then, tentatively at first, his lips. ‘And if there is anything I can do to… hasten your recovery, you have only to say the word.’ Her hand began very gently to wander downwards beneath the sheets until she found her objective. ‘Wow,’ she smiled. ‘I think I am already succeeding – a little.’

‘You are quite a woman, Caterina Sforza.’

She laughed. ‘*Tesoro*, if ever I were to write the story of my life, I would shock the world.’

*

Ezio was strong and still, at thirty years old, a young man in his prime. Moreover, he had undergone some of the toughest training known to man, so it was really no wonder that he was up and about again sooner than most would have been. But his right arm had been severely weakened by Checco’s blow, and he knew he needed to work hard to recover the full strength he required to resume his quest. He made himself be patient, and under Caterina’s strict but understanding guidance, spent his enforced time at Forlì in quiet contemplation, when he could often be found sitting under the vines lost in one of Poliziano’s books, or, more frequently, in vigorous exercise of every kind.

And then a morning came when Caterina arrived in his chamber to find him dressed for travel, and a page helping him pull on his riding boots. She sat on the bed beside him.

‘So the time has come?’ she said.

‘Yes. I can delay no longer.’

She looked sad and left the room, to return not long afterwards with a scroll. ‘Well, the time had to come,’ she said, ‘and God knows your task is more important than our enjoyment – for which I hope another time will come round again soon!’ She showed him the scroll. ‘Here – I have brought you a leaving-present.’

‘What is it?’

‘Something you will need.’

She unrolled it and Ezio saw that it was a map of the entire peninsula, from Lombardy to Calabria, and all across it, as well as the roads and towns, a number of crosses were marked on it, in red ink.

Ezio looked up at her. ‘It’s the map Machiavelli spoke of. Your husband’s –’

‘My *late* husband’s, *mio caro*. Niccolò and I made a couple of important discoveries while you were on your travels. The first is that we timed our… removal of dear Girolamo rather well, for he’d just about completed his work on this. The second is that it is of inestimable value, for even if the Templars have the Apple, they cannot hope to find the Vault without the Map.’

‘You know about the Vault?’

‘Darling, you can be just a tad naïve at times. Of course I do.’ She became more businesslike. ‘But fully to disarm our enemies, you must recover the Apple. This map will help you bring your full great task to an end.’

As she handed him the Map, their fingers touched, lingered and entwined. And their eyes would not leave each other’s.

‘There is an abbey in the Wetlands near here,’ Caterina said at last. ‘Dominicans. Their Order wears black hoods. I’d start there.’ Her eyes were shining and she looked away. ‘Now *go*! Find us that troublesome monk!’

Ezio smiled. ‘I think I’m going to miss you, Caterina.’

She smiled back, a bit too brightly. For once in her life she was finding it hard to be brave. ‘Oh, I know you will.’

24

The monk who welcomed Ezio at the Wetlands Abbey was as monks should be – plump and rubicund, but he had flaming red hair and puckish, shrewd eyes, and spoke with an accent Ezio recognized from some of the *condottieri* he'd encountered in Mario's service – the man was from Ireland.

'Blessings on you, brother.'

'*Grazie*, *Padre* –'

'I am Brother O'Callahan –'

'I wonder if you can help me?'

'That's why we are here, brother. Of course, we live in troubled times. It's hard to think straight without something in our stomachs.'

'You mean something in your coin-purse.'

'You take me wrong. I'm not asking you for anything.' The monk spread his hands. 'But the Lord helps the generous.'

Ezio shook out some florins and passed them across. 'If it's not enough…'

The monk looked reflective. 'Ah, well, the thought is there. But the truth is that the Lord actually *helps* the slightly more generous.'

Ezio continued shaking out coins until Brother O'Callahan's expression cleared. 'The Order appreciates your open-handedness, brother.' He folded his hands on his belly. 'What do you seek?'

'A black-hooded monk – who lacks one of his ten fingers.'

'Hmmn. Brother Guido has only nine toes. Are you sure it wasn't a toe?'

'Quite sure.'

'And then there's Brother Domenico, but it's his entire left arm he's lacking.'

'No. I'm sorry, but I'm quite sure it was a finger.'

‘Hmmn.’ The monk paused, deep in thought. ‘Now, wait a moment! I do recall a black-cowled monk with only nine fingers… Yes! Of course! It was when we had our last San Vicenzo’s Feast at our abbey in Tuscany.’

Ezio smiled. ‘Yes, I know the place. I’ll try there. *Grazie*.’

‘Go in peace, brother.’

‘I always do.’

Ezio crossed the mountains westwards into Tuscany, and though the journey was a long and difficult one, as autumn approached and the days became unkinder, he felt his greatest trepidation when he approached the abbey – for it was the place where one of those implicated in the plot to assassinate Lorenzo de’ Medici – Jacopo de’ Pazzi’s secretary, Stefano de Bagnone – had met his end at Ezio’s hands long ago.

It was unfortunate that the abbot who greeted him here was one who had been a witness to that killing.

‘Excuse me,’ Ezio said to him first. ‘I wonder if you can –’

But the abbot, recognizing him, drew back in horror, and cried, ‘May *all* the Archangels – Uriel, Raphael, Michael, Saraquêl, Gabriel, Remiel and Raguel – may they *all* in their Mightiness protect us!’ He turned his blazing eyes from heaven to Ezio. ‘Unholy Demon! Begone!’

‘What’s the matter?’ said Ezio, in consternation.

‘What’s the matter? What’s the *matter*? You are the one who murdered Brother Stefano. On this Holy Ground!’ A nervous group of brothers had gathered at a safe distance, and the abbot now turned to them. ‘He has *returned*! The killer of monks and priests has *returned*!’ he pronounced in a voice of thunder, and then took flight, followed by his flock.

The man was clearly in a state of high panic. Ezio had no choice but to give chase. The abbey was not as familiar to him as to the Abbot and his troop of monks. At last he tired of hurtling round unfamiliar stone corridors and cloisters, and leapt to the rooftops to get a better view of where the monks were headed, but this only threw them into a greater panic, and they started to scream, ‘He’s come! He’s come! Beëlzebub *is* come!’ and so he desisted and stuck to conventional means of pursuit.

Finally, he caught up with them. Panting, the Abbot rounded on him and croaked: ‘Begone, demon! Leave us alone! We have done no sin so great as thine!’

‘No, wait, listen,’ panted Ezio, almost equally out of breath. ‘I just want to ask you a question.’

‘We have called down no demons upon us! We seek no journey to the Afterlife just yet!’

Ezio placed his palms downwards. ‘Please. *Calma!* I wish you no harm!’

But the Abbot wasn’t listening. He rolled his eyes. ‘My God, my God, why have You forsaken me? I’m not yet *ready* to join your angels!’

And he took to his heels again.

Ezio was obliged to bring him down in an arms-to-feet tackle. They both got up, dusting themselves down in the middle of a circle of goggling monks.

‘Stop running away, please!’ pleaded Ezio.

The Abbot cowered. ‘No! Have mercy! I don’t want to die!’ he burbled.

Ezio, conscious that he was sounding prim, said: ‘Look, Father Abbot, I only kill those who kill others. And your Brother Stefano was a killer. He tried to murder Duke Lorenzo in 1478.’ He paused, breathing heavily. ‘Be reassured, *Messer Abate*, I’m certain you are no such thing as a murderer.’

The Abbot’s look became a trace calmer, but there was still suspicion in his eyes.

‘What do you want, then?’ he said.

‘All right, now, listen to me. I’m looking for a monk dressed like you are – a Dominican – who is missing a finger.’

The Abbot looked wary. ‘Missing a finger, do you say? Like Fra’ Savonarola?’

Ezio seized on the name. ‘*Savonarola*? Who is he? Do you know him?’

‘I did, *Messer*. He was one of us… for a time.’

‘And then?’

The Abbot shrugged. ‘We suggested he take a nice long rest at a hermitage in the mountains. He didn’t quite… fit in here…’

‘It seems to me, *Abate*, that his time as a hermit may be over. Do you know where he may have gone now?’

‘Oh dear me…’ The Abbot searched his mind. ‘If he’s left the hermitage, it may be that he has returned to Santa Maria del Carmine, in Florence. It’s where he studied. Perhaps that’s where he’d go back to.’

Ezio breathed a sigh of relief. ‘Thank you, Abbot. Go with God.’

It was strange for Ezio to be in his home town again, after so long. There were many memories to deal with. But circumstances dictated that he work alone. He could not contact even old friends or allies, lest the enemy were alerted.

It was also clear that even if the city remained stable, the church, at least, which he sought, was in turmoil. A monk came running from it in fear.

He accosted the monk. ‘Whoa, there, Brother. It’s all right!’

The monk looked at him, wild-eyed. ‘Stay away, my friend. If you value your life!’

‘What’s happened here?’

‘Soldiers from Rome have seized our church! They’ve scattered my brothers, asking questions that make no sense. They keep demanding that we give them *fruit*!’

‘What kind of fruit?’

‘Apples!’

‘Apples? *Diavolo!* Rodrigo has got here before me!’ hissed Ezio to himself.

‘They’ve dragged one of my fellow Carmelites behind the church! I’m sure they’re going to kill him!’

‘Carmelites? You are not *Dominicans*?’ Ezio left the man, and made his way carefully round the outer walls of Santa Maria, hugging them. He moved as stealthily as a mongoose confronting a cobra. When he reached the walls of the church’s garden, he skimmed to the roof. What he saw below him took even his experienced breath away. Several Borgia guards were beating the shit out of a tall young monk. He looked about thirty-five years old.

‘Tell us!’ cried the leader of the guards. ‘Tell us, or I will make you hurt so badly you’ll wish you’d never been born. *Where is the Apple*?’

‘Please! I don’t know! I don’t know what you’re talking about!’

The lead guard leaned in close. ‘Confess! Your name is Savonarola!’

‘Yes! I told you! But you beat the name out of me!’

‘Then tell us and your suffering will cease. Where the fuck is *the Apple*?’ The interrogator kicked the monk savagely in the crotch. The monk howled in pain. ‘Not that *that’ll* make much difference to a man in your *missionary* position,’ jeered the guard.

Ezio watched, deeply concerned. If this monk was indeed Savonarola, the Borgia thugs might kill him before he himself got the truth out of the man.

‘Why do you keep lying to me?’ sneered the guard. ‘My Master will not be pleased to hear you made me torture you to death! Do you want to get me into *trouble*?’

‘I don’t have any apple,’ sobbed the monk. ‘I’m just a simple friar. *Please* let me go!’

‘In a pig’s eye!’

‘I know *nothing*!’ the monk cried piteously.

‘If you want me to stop,’ shouted the guard, kicking him again in the same place, ‘then tell me the truth, Brother Girolamo – *Savonarola*!’

The monk bit his lip, but stubbornly replied, ‘I’ve told you everything I know!’

The guard kicked him again, and had his henchmen grab his ankles and drag the man mercilessly along the cobbled ground, his head bouncing painfully on the hard stone. The monk screamed, and struggled in vain.

'Had enough, you *abominato*?' The lead guard held his face close again. 'Are you so ready to meet your Maker, that you would lie again and again, just to see Him?'

'I am a plain monk,' wept the Carmelite, whose robes were dangerously similar in cut and colour to that of the Dominicans. 'I have no *fruit* of any kind! Please…'

The guard kicked him. In the same place. Again. The monk's body twisted in an agony beyond tears.

Ezio had had enough. He sprang down, a phantom of vengeance, slicing for once in pure rage with poison-dagger and double-blade. Within a minute of sheer slaughter, the Borgia thugs, all of them, lay either dead or groaning in the same agony they'd inflicted, on the flagstones of the courtyard.

The monk, weeping, clung to Ezio's knees: '*Grazie, grazie, Salvatore*.'

Ezio stroked his head. '*Calma, calma*. It will be all right now, my Brother.' But Ezio also looked at the monk's fingers.

All ten were intact.

'You have ten fingers,' he murmured, disappointed despite himself.

'Yes,' cried the monk. 'I have ten fingers. And I don't have any other apples than those that come to the monastery from the market every Thursday!' He stood up, shook himself down, tenderly readjusted himself, and swore. 'In the name of God! Has the whole world stopped making *sense*?'

'Who are you? Why did they take you?' asked Ezio.

'Because they found out that indeed my family name is Savonarola! But why should I betray my cousin to those thugs?'

'Do you know what he's done?'

'I know nothing! He is a monk, like me. He chose the harsher Order of the Dominicans, it is true, but –'

'He has lost a finger?'

'Yes, but how could anyone – ?' A kind of light was dawning in the monk's eyes.

'Who is Girolamo Savonarola?' persisted Ezio.

'My cousin, and a devoted man of God. And who, may I ask, are you, though I thank you humbly for my rescue, and owe you whatever favour you may ask?'

'I am… nameless,' said Ezio. 'But do me the favour of telling your name.'

'Fra' *Marcello* Savonarola,' the monk replied meekly.

Ezio took that in. His mind raced. 'Where is your cousin Girolamo?'

Fra' Marcello thought, struggling with his conscience. 'It is true that my cousin… has a singular view of how to serve God… He is spreading a doctrine of his own… You may find him now in Venice.'

'And what does he do there?'

Marcello straightened his shoulders. 'I think he has set off on the wrong path. He preaches fire and brimstone. He claims to see the future.' Marcello looked at Ezio through red-rimmed eyes, eyes full of agony. 'If you really want my opinion, he spews *madness*!'

25

Ezio felt that he had spent too long on what seemed to be a fruitless quest. Chasing Savonarola seemed like chasing a will o' the wisp, or a chimera, or your own tail. But the search had to continue, remorselessly, for the nine-fingered man of God held the Apple – the key to more than he could imagine possible, and he was a dangerous religious maniac, a loose cannon potentially less controllable than the Master, Rodrigo Borgia, himself.

It was Teodora who met him as he disembarked from the Ravenna galley at the Venice docks.

Venice in 1492 was still under the relatively honest rule of Doge Agostino Barbarigo. The city was abuzz with talk of how a Genoese seaman called Christoffa Corombo, whose mad plans to sail westwards across the Ocean Sea had been turned down by Venice, had got funding from Spain, and was about to set out. Had Venice itself been mad not to fund the expedition? If Corombo succeeded, a safe sea passage to the Indies might be established, side-stepping the old land route now blocked by the Ottoman Turks. But Ezio's mind was far too full of other matters to pay much attention to these matters of politics and trade.

'We have your news,' Teodora said. 'But are you certain?'

'It's the only lead I've got, and it seems a good one. I am certain that the Apple is here again, in the hands of the monk, Savonarola. I hear he preaches to the masses of the hell and fire to come.'

'I have heard of this man.'

'Do you know where he can be found, Teodora?'

'No. But I've seen a Herald drawing crowds in the industrial district, preaching the kind of fire-and-brimstone stuff-and-nonsense you speak of.

Perhaps he is a disciple of your monk. Come with me. You will certainly be my guest while you are here, and once you are settled we will go straight to where this man delivers his sermons.'

Both Ezio and Teodora, and indeed all intelligent and rational people, knew why a kind of blood-and-thunder hysteria was beginning to grip the people. The half-millennium year of 1500 was not far off, and many believed that that year would mark the Second Coming, when the Lord would '*come with clouds, in his own glory, and the glory of his Father, with ten thousand of his saints, even myriads of angels, and shall sit upon the throne of his glory. And before him shall be gathered all nations; and he shall separate them one from another, and shall set the sheep, the Saved, on his right hand, and the goats, the Damned, upon the left*'.

San Matteo's description of the Last Judgement reverberated through the imaginations of many.

'This Herald and his boss are really cashing in on the *febbre di fine secolo,*' said Teodora. 'For all I know, they believe in it themselves.'

'I think they must do,' said Ezio. 'The danger is, that with the Apple in their hands, they may actually bring about a world disaster that has nothing to do with God, and everything to do with the Devil.' He paused. 'But for the moment they have not unleashed the power they have, and thank God for that, for I doubt if they would know how to control it. For the moment at least they seem content to foretell the Apocalypse – and that –' he laughed bitterly, '– has always been an easy sell.'

'But it gets worse,' said Teodora. 'Indeed, you might almost believe that the Apocalypse were really at hand. Have you heard the bad news?'

'I have heard none since I left Forlì.'

'Lorenzo de' Medici has died at his villa in Careggi.'

Ezio looked grim. 'That is indeed a tragedy. Lorenzo was a true friend to my family and without his protecting hand I fear I may never recover the Palazzo Auditore. But that is as nothing compared with what his death may mean to the peace he maintained between the city-states. It was always fragile at the best of times.'

'There is more,' said Teodora, 'And it is, if anything, worse news even than Lorenzo's death.' She paused. 'You must brace yourself for this, Ezio. The Spaniard, Rodrigo Borgia, has been elected Pope. He rules the Vatican and Rome as the Supreme Pontiff, Alexander VI!'

'*What!* By what devilry – ?'

'The Conclave of Rome has only just ended – this month. The rumour is that Rodrigo simply bought most of the votes. Even Ascanio Sforza, who was the

most likely candidate standing against him, voted for him! Four mule-loads of silver was his bribe, they say.'

'What profits him to be Pope? What is it he seeks?'

'Is such great influence not enough?' Teodora looked at him. 'Now we are in the power of a wolf, Ezio. The most rapacious, perhaps, the world has ever seen.'

'What you say is true, Teodora. But the power he seeks is even greater than that which the Papacy will give him. If he controls the Vatican, he is that much closer to gaining access to the Vault; and he is still on the trail of the Apple, the "Piece of Eden" he needs to give him – the power of God Himself!'

'Let us pray that you get it back into the hands of the Assassins – Rodrigo as Pope and Master of the Templars is dangerous enough. Once he has the Apple as well…' She broke off. 'As you say, he will be indestructible.'

'It's odd,' said Ezio.

'What is?'

'Our friend Savonarola doesn't know it, but he has two huntsmen chasing him.'

*

Teodora conducted Ezio to the large open square in the industrial quarter of Venice where the Herald was wont to conduct his sermons, and left him there. Ezio, his hood up and his face lowered but watchful, blended in with the crowd that was already gathering. It wasn't long before the square was packed, the mob thronging around a small wooden stage on to which a man now stepped, an ascetic-looking man with cold blue eyes and hollow cheeks, iron-grey hair and gnarled hands, dressed in a plain grey woollen robe. He started to speak, pausing only when the mad cheers of the crowd obliged him to. Ezio saw how skilfully one man could work hundreds into a state of blind hysteria.

'Gather, children, and hear my cry! For the End of Days draws nigh. Are you ready for what is to come? Are you ready to see the Light my brother Savonarola has blessed us with?' He raised his hands, and Ezio, who knew exactly what light the Herald was referring to, listened soberly. 'Dark days are upon us,' continued the Herald, 'But my brother has shown me the path forward unto salvation, unto the heavenly light that awaits us. But only if we are ready, only if we embrace him. Let Savonarola be our guide, for he alone knows what is to come. He shall not lead us astray.' Now the Herald leant forward earnestly on the lectern before him. 'Are you ready for the final reckoning, brothers and sisters? Whom shall you follow when the time comes?' He paused again for effect.

‘There are many in the churches who claim to offer salvation, the summoners, the pardoners, the scatterbrained slaves of superstition… But nay, my children! They are all in thrall to the Borgia pope, all in thrall to “Pope” Alexander, the sixth and most mortgaged of that name!’

The crowd screamed. Ezio, inwardly, winced. He remembered the apparent prophecies he had seen the Apple project in Leonardo’s workshop. Somewhere in the distant future: a time when hell would *truly* be unleashed upon the earth – unless he could stop it.

‘Our new Pope Alexander is not a spiritual man; he is not a man of the soul. Men like him buy your prayers and sell your benefices for profit. All the priests of our churches are ecclesiastical merchants! Only one among us is a true man of the spirit, only one among us has seen the future, and spoken with the Lord! My brother, Savonarola! He shall lead us!’

Ezio thought: had that mad monk *opened* the Apple, as he had himself? Had he unleashed the same visions? What was it Leonardo had said about the Apple – *unsafe for weaker brains*?

‘Savonarola shall lead us to the light,’ the Herald was concluding. ‘Savonarola shall tell us what is to come! Savonarola shall carry us to the front door of heaven itself! We shall not want in the new world that Savonarola has borne witness to. Brother Savonarola walks the very path to God we have been seeking!’

He raised his hands again, as the mob yelled and cheered.

Ezio knew that the only way to find the monk was through this acolyte. But he had to find a way to reach the man without arousing the suspicions of the devoted crowd. He made his way forward cautiously, acting the role of the meek man seeking conversion to the Herald’s flock.

It wasn’t easy. He was jostled aggressively by people who could see he was a stranger, a newcomer, a person to be regarded with reserve. But he smiled, bowed, and even, as a last resort, threw money down, saying, ‘I want to give alms to the cause of Savonarola and those who support him and believe in him.’ And money worked its usual charm. In fact, Ezio thought, money is the greatest converter of them all.

At last the Herald, who’d observed Ezio’s progress with a mixture of amusement and contempt, bade his minders step aside and beckoned to him, leading him to a quiet place, a little piazzetta off the main square, where they could have a private conversation. Ezio was pleased to see that the Herald clearly thought he’d made an important and wealthy new addition to his flock.

‘Where is Savonarola himself?’ he asked.

‘He is everywhere, brother,’ replied the Herald. ‘He is at one with all of us, and all of us are at one with him.’

‘Listen, friend,’ said Ezio, urgently. ‘I seek the man, not the myth. Please tell me where he is.’

The Herald looked at him askance, and Ezio clearly saw the madness in his eyes. ‘I have told you where he is. Look, Savonarola loves you just as you are. He will show you the Light. He will show you the *future*!’

‘But I must talk to him myself. I must see the great leader! And I have great riches to bring to his mighty crusade!’

The Herald looked cunning at that. ‘I see,’ he said. ‘Be patient. The hour is not yet come. But you *shall* join us in our pilgrimage, brother.’

And Ezio was patient. He was patient for a long time. Then, one day, he received a summons from the Herald to meet him at the Venice dockyards at dusk. He arrived early and waited impatiently and nervously, until finally he saw a shadowy figure approaching through the evening mists.

‘I was not sure you would come,’ he greeted the Herald.

The Herald looked pleased. ‘The quest for Truth is passionate in you, brother. And it has withstood the test of time. But now we are ready, and our great leader has assumed the mantle of command he was born to. Come!’

He motioned ahead of him, and led Ezio to the quayside where a large galley waited. Near it, a crowd of the Faithful waited. The Herald addressed them:

‘My children! It is time at last for us to depart. Our brother and spiritual leader Girolamo Savonarola awaits us in the city he has at last made his own!’

‘Yes, he has! The son-of-a-bitch bastard has brought my town and my home to its knees – to the brink of insanity!’

The crowd and Ezio turned to look at the person who had spoken, a long-haired young man in a black cap, with full lips and a weak face, now contorted in anger.

‘I have just escaped from there,’ he continued. ‘Thrown out of my dukedom by that prick King Charles of France, whose meddling has caused me to be replaced by that Dog of God, Savonarola!’

The crowd’s mood turned ugly, and they would surely have seized the young man and thrown him into the lagoon if the Herald had not stayed them.

‘Let the man speak his mind,’ ordered the Herald, and, turning to the stranger, asked: ‘Why do you take Savonarola’s name in vain, brother?’

‘Why? *Why*? Because of what he’s done to Florence! He controls the city! The Signoria are either behind him, or powerless against him. He whips up the mob, and even people who should know better, like *Maestro* Botticelli, follow him

slavishly. They burn books, works of art, anything which that madman deems immoral!'

'Savonarola is in Florence now?' asked Ezio intently. 'You're sure?'

'Would it were otherwise! Would he were on the moon or in hell's mouth! I barely got away with my life!'

'And who might you be exactly, brother?' asked the Herald, impatient now and showing it.

The young man drew himself up. 'I am Piero de' Medici. Son of Lorenzo, *Il Magnifico*, and rightful ruler of Florence!'

Ezio clasped his hand. 'Well met, Piero. Your father was my staunch friend.'

Piero looked at him. 'Thank you for that, whoever you may be. As for my father, he was lucky to die before all this madness broke like a giant wave over our city.' He turned heedlessly to the angry crowd. 'Do not support that wretched monk! He is a dangerous fool with an ego the size of the Duomo! He should be put down like the mad dog that he is!'

Now, as one, the crowd growled in righteous fury. The Herald turned to Piero and yelled, 'Heretic! Seeder of evil thoughts!' To the crowd he cried, 'This is the man who must be *put down*! Be *silenced* ! He must *burn*!'

Both Piero and Ezio, by his side, had their swords out by now, and faced the menacing mob.

'Who are you?' asked Piero.

'Auditore, Ezio,' he replied.

'Ah! *Sono grato del tuo aiuto*. My father spoke of you often.' His eyes flickered over their adversaries. 'Are we going to get out of this?'

'I hope so. But you weren't exactly tactful.'

'How was I to know?'

'You've just destroyed untold effort and preparation; but never mind. Look to your sword!'

The fight was hard but short. The two men let the mob beat them back to an abandoned warehouse, and it was there that they took their stand. Luckily, though enraged, the crowd of pilgrims were far from being seasoned fighters, and once the boldest of them had retreated nursing deep cuts and slashes from Ezio's and Piero's longswords, the rest of them fell back, and fled. Only the Herald, grim and grey, stood his ground.

'Impostor!' he said to Ezio. 'You shall freeze for ever in the ice of the Fourth Ring of the Ninth Circle. And it is I who will send you there.' From his robes he produced a keen-edged basilard and ran at Ezio holding it above his head, ready to strike. Ezio, backing, almost fell and was at the Herald's mercy, but Piero sliced at the man's legs and Ezio, having regained his feet, unleashed his double-

blade – punching the sharp points deep into the man's abdomen. The herald's whole frame shuddered with the impact; he gasped, and fell, writhing and twitching, clawing the ground, until at last he was still.

'Hope that pays you back for the bad turn I've done you,' said Piero, with a rueful smile. 'Come on! Let's get to the Doge's Palace and tell Agostino to send the Watch out to make sure that bunch of lunatics has split up, and that they've all gone back to their kennels.'

'*Grazie*,' said Ezio. 'But I go the other way. I go to Florence.'

Piero looked at him incredulously. 'What? Into the mouth of hell itself?'

'I have my own reasons for seeking out Savonarola. But perhaps it's not too late to undo the damage he's done to our native city as well.'

'Then I wish you luck,' said Piero. 'Whatever end you seek.'

26

Fra' Girolamo Savonarola took over the effective government of Florence in 1494, aged forty-two. He was a tormented man, a twisted genius, and the worst kind of fanatical believer; but the most frightening thing about him was that people allowed him not only to lead them, but to incite them to commit the most ludicrous and destructive acts of folly. All based on a terror of hell-fire, and on a doctrine which taught that all pleasure, all worldly goods, and all the works of man, were despicable, and that only by complete self-abnegation could a person find the true light of faith.

No wonder, thought Ezio, pondering these things as he rode towards his home town, that Leonardo stayed put in Milan – apart from anything else, from his friend's point of view, Ezio had learned that homosexuality, hitherto winked at or punishable by an affordable fine, was once again a capital offence in Florence. And no wonder, too, that the great materialist and humanist school of thinkers and poets who had gathered around the nurturing and enlightened spirit of Lorenzo had broken up, and sought less barren soil than the intellectual desert which Florence was fast becoming.

As he approached the city, Ezio became aware of large groups of black-robed monks and soberly attired laymen heading in the same direction. All looked solemn but righteous. All walked with their heads bent.

'Where are you bound?' he asked one of these passers-by.

'To Florence. To sit at the feet of the great leader,' said a pasty-faced merchant, before continuing on his way.

The road was broad, and approaching him from the city Ezio saw another mass of people, evidently leaving town. They also walked with their heads bent, and their expressions were serious and depressed. As they passed him, Ezio

heard snatches of their conversations, and realized that these people were going into voluntary exile. They pushed carts piled high, or carried sacks, or bundles of possessions. They were refugees, banished from their home either by edict of the Monk, or by choice, since they could bear to live under his rule no longer.

'If Piero had had only a tenth of his father's talent, we'd have somewhere to call home…' said one.

'We never should have let that madman gain a foothold in our city,' muttered another. 'Look at all the misery he's wrought…'

'What I don't understand is why so many of us are willing to accept his oppression,' said a woman.

'Well, anywhere's better than Florence now,' another woman said. 'We were just thrown out when we refused to hand over everything we own to his precious Church of San Marco!'

'It's sorcery, that's the only way I can explain it. Even *Maestro* Botticelli is under Savonarola's spell… Mind you, the man's getting old, he must be damned near fifty, maybe he's hedging his bets with heaven.'

'Book burnings, arrests, all those endless bloody sermons! And to think what Florence was just two short years ago… a beacon against ignorance! And now here we are again, back mired in the Dark Ages.'

And then a woman said something which made Ezio prick up his ears. 'Sometimes I wish the Assassin would return to Florence, that we might be free of this tyranny.'

'In your dreams!' replied her friend. 'The Assassin's a myth! A bogey-man parents tell their children about.'

'You're wrong – my father saw him in San Gimignano,' the first woman sighed. 'But it *was* years ago.'

'Yeah, yeah – *se lo tu dici*.'

Ezio rode on past them, his heart heavy. But his spirits rose when he saw a familiar figure coming along the road to meet him.

'*Salute*, Ezio,' said Machiavelli, his serious-humorous face older now, but more interesting for the etching of the years.

'*Salute*, Niccolò.'

'You've picked a fine time for a homecoming.'

'You know me. Where there's sickness, I like to try to cure it.'

'We could certainly use your help now,' Machiavelli sighed. 'There's no doubt Savonarola couldn't have got where he is now without the use of that powerful arte-fact, the Apple.' He held up his hand. 'I know all about what has happened to you since last we met. Caterina sent a courier from Forlì two years ago, and more recently one arrived with a letter from Piero in Venice.'

‘I am here for the Apple. It has been out of our hands far too long.’

‘I suppose in a sense we should be grateful to the ghastly Girolamo,’ said Machiavelli. ‘At least he kept it out of the new Pope’s hands.’

‘Has he tried anything?’

‘He keeps trying. There’s a rumour that Alexander’s planning to excommunicate our dear Dominican. Not that that’ll change much around here.’

Ezio said, ‘We should get to work on retrieving it without delay.’

‘The Apple? Of course – though it’ll be more complicated than you might think.’

‘Hah! When isn’t it?’ Ezio looked at him. ‘Why don’t you fill me in on things?’

‘Come, let’s go back to the city. I’ll tell you everything I know. There’s little to relate. In a nutshell, King Charles VIII of France finally managed to bring Florence to its knees. Piero fled. Charles, land-hungry as ever – why the hell they call him “the Affable” is beyond me – marched on to Naples, and Savonarola, the Ugly Duckling, suddenly saw his chance and filled the power-vacuum. He’s like any dictator anywhere, tinpot or grand. Totally humourless, totally convinced, and filled with an unshakeable sense of his own importance. The most effective and the nastiest kind of Prince you could wish for.’ He paused. ‘One day I’ll write a book about it.’

‘And the Apple was the means to his end?’

Machiavelli spread his hands. ‘Only in part. A lot of it, I hate to say, is down to his own charisma. It isn’t the city itself he’s enthralled, but its leaders, men possessed of influence and power. Of course some of the Signoria opposed him at first, but now –’ Machiavelli looked worried. ‘Now they’re all in his pocket. The man everyone once reviled suddenly became the one they worshipped. If people didn’t agree, they were obliged to leave. It’s still happening, as you’ve seen today. And now the Florentine council oppress the citizens and ensure that the mad Monk’s will is done.’

‘But what of decent ordinary people? Do they really act as if they had no say at all in the matter?’

Machiavelli smiled sadly. ‘You know the answer to that as well as I do, Ezio. Rare is the man willing to oppose the status quo. And so – it falls to us to help them see their way through this.’

By now the two Assassins had reached the city gates. The armed guards of the city, like all police, serving the interest of the state without reference to its morality, scrutinized their papers and waved them through, though not before Ezio had noticed another pack of them busy piling up the corpses of some other uniforms who carried the Borgia crest. He pointed this out to Niccolò.

‘Oh yes,’ said Machiavelli. As I said, friend Rodrigo – I’ll never get used to calling the bastard Alexander – keeps trying. He sends his soldiers into Florence, and Florence sends them back, usually in pieces.’

‘So he does know the Apple’s here?’

‘Of course he does! And I must admit, it’s an unfortunate complication.’

‘And where is Savonarola?’

‘He rules the city from the Convento di San Marco. Almost never leaves it. Thank God *Fra’* Angelico didn’t live to see the day Brother Girolamo moved in!’

They dismounted, stabled their horses, and Machiavelli arranged lodgings for Ezio. Paola’s old house of pleasure was shut down, along with all the others, as Machiavelli explained. Sex and gambling, dancing and pageantry, were all high on the list of Savonarola’s no-nos. Righteous killing, and oppression, on the other hand, were fine.

After Ezio was settled, Machiavelli walked with him towards the great religious complex of Saint Mark. Ezio’s eyes ranged the buildings appraisingly. ‘A direct assault against Savonarola would be dangerous,’ he decided. ‘Especially with the Apple in his possession.’

‘True,’ agreed Machiavelli. ‘But what other option is there?’

‘Aside from the city leaders, who doubtless have vested interests, are you convinced that the people’s minds are fundamentally their own?’

‘An optimist might be inclined to take a bet on it,’ said Machiavelli.

‘My point is, they follow the Monk not by choice, but by dint of force and fear?’

‘No one apart from a Dominican or a politician would argue with that.’

‘Then I propose we use this to our advantage. If we can silence his lieutenants and stir up discontent, Savonarola will be distracted, and we’ll have a chance to strike.’

Machiavelli smiled. ‘That’s clever. There ought to be an adjective to describe people like you. I’ll speak with La Volpe and Paola – yes, they’re still here, though they’ve had to go underground. They can help us organize an uprising as you free the districts.’

‘Then it’s settled.’ Ezio was troubled, though, and Machiavelli could see it. He led him to the quiet cloister of a little church nearby, and sat him down.

‘What is it, friend?’ he asked.

‘Two things, but they are personal.’

‘Tell me.’

‘My old family palazzo – what’s become of it? I hardly dare go to look.’

A shadow passed across Machiavelli's face. 'My dear Ezio, be strong. Your palazzo stands, but Lorenzo's ability to protect it lasted only as long as his own power, his own life. Piero tried to follow his father's example but after he was kicked out by the French the Palazzo Auditore was requisitioned and used as a billet for Charles's Swiss mercenaries. After they had moved south, Savonarola's men stripped it of everything that was left in it, and closed the place down. Have courage. One day you will restore it.'

'And Annetta?'

'She escaped, thank God, and joined your mother at Monteriggioni.'

'That at least is something.'

After a silence, Machiavelli asked, 'And what is the second thing?'

Ezio whispered, 'Cristina –'

'You ask me to tell you hard things, *amico mio*.' Machiavelli frowned. 'But you must know the truth.' He paused. 'My friend, she is dead. Manfredo would not leave, as many of their friends left after the twin plagues of the French and Savonarola. He was convinced that Piero would organize a counter-offensive and get the city back. But there was an horrific night, soon after the Monk came to power, when all those who would not voluntarily commit their belongings to the bonfires of the vanities which the Monk organized to burn and destroy all luxurious and worldly things, had their houses ransacked and put to the torch.'

Ezio listened, making himself stay calm, though his heart was bursting.

'Savonarola's fanatics,' Machiavelli went on, 'forced their way into the Palazzo d'Arzenta. Manfredo tried to defend himself, but there were too many pitted against him and his own men… And Cristina would not leave him.' Machiavelli paused for a long moment, fighting back tears himself. 'In their frenzy, those religious maniacs cut her down too.'

Ezio stared at the whitewashed wall in front of him. Every last detail, every last crack, even the ants moving across it, all were thrown into dreadful focus.

27

How every hope of ours is raised in vain,
How spoiled the plans we laid so fair and well,
How ignorance throughout the earth doth reign,
Death, who is mistress of us all, can tell.
In song and dance and jousts some pass their days,
Some vow their talents unto gentle arts,
Some hold the world in scorn and all its ways,
Some hide the impulses that move their hearts.
Vain thoughts and wishes, cares of every kind
Greatly upon this erring earth prevail
In various presence after nature's lore;
Fortune doth fashion with inconstant mind,
All things are transient here below and frail,
Death only standeth fast for evermore.

Ezio let the book of Lorenzo's sonnets fall from his hand. The death of Cristina made him all the more determined to remove its cause. His city had suffered long enough under the rule of Savonarola, too many of his fellow citizens, from every conceivable walk of life, had fallen under his spell, and those who disagreed were either discriminated against, driven underground, or forced into exile. It was time to act.

'We have lost to exile many people who might have helped us,' Machiavelli explained to him. But even Savonarola's chief enemies outside the city-state, I mean the Duke of Milan and our old friend Rodrigo, Pope Alexander VI, haven't been able to dislodge him.'

'And what of these bonfires?'

'The most insane thing of all. Savonarola and his close associates organize groups of their followers to go from door to door, demanding the surrender of any and all objects they deem to be morally questionable, even cosmetics and

mirrors, let alone paintings, books considered to be immoral, all sorts of games including chess, for God's sake, musical instruments – you name it; if the Monk and his followers think they distract from their take on religion, they've been brought to the Piazza della Signoria, placed on huge bonfires, and burned.' Machiavelli shook his head. 'Florence has lost much of value and much of beauty in this way.'

'But surely the city must be getting weary of this kind of behaviour?'

Machiavelli brightened. 'That is true, and that feeling is our best ally. I think Savonarola genuinely believes that the Day of Judgement is at hand – the only trouble is, it shows no sign of coming, and even some who started out believing in him fervently are beginning to falter in their faith. Unfortunately there are many of influence and power here who still support him without question. If they could be removed…'

So began for Ezio a frenetic period of hunting down and dispatching a series of such supporters, and they did indeed come from all walks of life – there were an artist of note, an old soldier, a merchant, several priests, a doctor, a farmer, and one or two aristocrats, all of whom clung fanatically to the ideas imbued in them by the Monk. Some saw the folly of their ways before they died; others remained unshaken in their conviction. Ezio, as he carried out this unpleasant task, was more often than not threatened with death himself. But soon the rumours began to filter through the city – talk heard in the late hours, mutterings in illicit tavernas and back alleys. The Assassin is back. The Assassin has come to save Florence…

It saddened Ezio to the core to see the city of his birth, his family, his heritage so abused by the hatred and insanity of religious fervour. It was with a hardened heart that he plied his trade of death – a cold icy wind cleansing the bastardized city of those who had pulled *Firenze* from her glory. As ever, he killed with compassion, knowing that no other way was possible for those who had fallen so far from God. Through these hours of darkness, he never once swerved from his duty to the Creed of the Assassin.

Gradually the general mood of the city wavered, and Savonarola saw his support ebbing, as Machiavelli, La Volpe and Paola worked in tandem with Ezio to organize an uprising, an uprising guided by a slow but forceful process of enlightenment of the people.

The last of the 'targets' for Ezio was a beguiled preacher, who at the time Ezio tracked him down was preaching to a crowd in front of the church of Santo Spirito.

‘People of Florence! Come! Gather round. Listen well to what I say! The end approaches! Now is the time to repent! To beg God’s forgiveness. Listen to me, if you cannot see what is happening for yourselves. The *signs* are all around us: Unrest! Famine! Disease! Corruption! These are the harbingers of *darkness*! We must stand firm in our devotion lest they *consume us all* !’ He scanned them with his fiery eyes. ‘I see you doubt, that you think me mad. Ahhhh… but did the Romans not say the same of Jesus? Know that I, too, once shared your uncertainty, your fear. But that was before Savonarola came to me. He showed me the *truth*! At last, my eyes were *opened*. And so I stand before you today in the hope that I might open yours as well!’ The preacher paused for breath. ‘Understand that we stand upon a precipice. On one side, the shining, glorious *Kingdom of God*. On the other – a bottomless pit of *despair* ! Already you teeter precariously on the edge. Men like the Medici and the other families you once called masters sought earthly goods and gain. The abandoned their beliefs in favour of material pleasures, and they would have seen you all do the same.’ He paused again, this time for effect, and continued: ‘Our wise prophet once said, “The only good thing that we owe Plato and Aristotle is that they brought forward many arguments which we can use against the heretics. Yet they and other philosophers are now in hell.” If you value your immortal souls you’ll turn back from this unholy course and embrace the teachings of our prophet, Savonarola. Then you will sanctify your bodies and spirits – you will discover the Glory of God! You will, at last, become what our Creator intended: loyal and obedient servants!’

But the crowd, already thinning out, was losing interest, and the last few people were now moving away. Ezio stepped forward and addressed the beguiled preacher. ‘Your mind,’ he said. ‘I sense it is your own.’

The preacher laughed. ‘Not all of us required persuasion or coercion to be convinced. I already believed. All I have said is true!’

‘Nothing is true,’ replied Ezio. ‘And what I do now is no easy thing.’ He unsprung his wrist-blade and ran the preacher through. ‘*Requiescat in pace*,’ he said. Turning away from the kill, he pulled his cowl close over his head.

It was a long, hard road, but towards the end Savonarola himself became the Assassins’ unwitting ally, because Florence’s financial power waned: the Monk detested both commerce and making money, the two things which had made the city great. And still the Day of Judgement did not come. Instead, a liberal Franciscan friar challenged the Monk to an ordeal by fire. The Monk refused to accept, and his authority took another knock. By the beginning of May 1497, many of the city’s young men marched in protest, and the protest became a riot.

After that, taverns started to reopen, people went back to singing and dancing and gambling and whoring – enjoying themselves, in fact. And businesses and banks reopened as, slowly at first, exiles returned to the city quarters now liberated from the Monk's regime. It didn't happen overnight, but finally, a year almost to the day after the riot, for the man clung doggedly to power, the moment of Savonarola's fall seemed imminent.

'You've done well, Ezio,' Paola told him, as they waited with La Volpe and Machiavelli before the gates of the San Marco complex, together with a large, expectant and unruly crowd gathered from the free districts.

'Thank you. But what happens now?'

'Watch,' said Machiavelli.

With a loud crash a door opened above their heads and a lean figure swathed in black appeared on a balcony. The Monk glowered at the assembled populace. 'Silence!' he commanded. 'I demand silence!'

Awed despite themselves, the crowd quietened.

'Why are you here?' demanded Savonarola. 'Why do you disturb me? You should be cleansing your homes!'

But the crowd roared its disapproval. 'Of what?' one man yelled. 'You've already taken everything!'

'I have held my hand!' Savonarola shouted back. 'But now you will do as I command! You will *submit*!'

And from his robes he produced the Apple and raised it high. Ezio saw that the hand which held it lacked a finger. Instantly, the Apple started to glow, and the crowd fell back, gasping. But Machiavelli, remaining calm, steadied himself and unhesitatingly threw a knife which pierced the Monk's forearm. With a cry of pain and rage, Savonarola let go of the Apple, which fell from the balcony into the throng below.

'*Nooooo*!' he screamed. But all of a sudden he seemed diminished, his demeanour both embarrassing and pathetic. That was enough for the mob. It rallied, and stormed the gates of San Marco.

'Quick, Ezio,' said La Volpe. 'Find the Apple. It can't be far away.'

Ezio could see it, rolling unheeded between the feet of the crowd. He dived in among them, getting badly knocked about, but at last it was within his grasp. Quickly he transferred it to the safety of his belt-pouch. The gates of San Marco were open now – probably some of the brethren within considered that discretion was the better part of valour and wanted to save their church and monastery as well as their own skins by bowing to the inevitable. There were not a few among them too who had had enough of the Monk's tiresome despotism. The crowd

surged through the gates, to re-emerge, some minutes later, bearing Savonarola, kicking and screaming, on their shoulders.

'Take him to the Palazzo della Signoria,' commanded Machiavelli. 'Let him be tried there!'

'Idiots! Blasphemers!' yelled Savonarola. 'God bears witness to this sacrilege! How dare you handle His prophet in this way!' He was partly drowned out by the angry shouts of the crowd, but he was as livid as he was frightened, and he kept it up – for the Monk knew (not that he thought in quite these terms) that this was his last roll of the dice. 'Heretics! You'll all burn in hell for this! *Do you hear me? Burn!*'

Ezio and his fellow Assassins followed as the mob bore the Monk away, still crying out his mixture of pleas and threats: 'The sword of God will fall upon the Earth swiftly and suddenly. Release me, for only I can save you from His wrath! My children, heed me before it is too late! There is but one true salvation, and you forsake the path to it for mere material gain! If you do not bow again to me, all Florence shall know the anger of the Lord – and this city will fall like Sodom and Gomorrah, for He will know the depth of your betrayal. *Aiutami, Dio!* I am brought down by ten thousand Judases!'

Ezio was close enough to hear one of the citizens carrying the Monk say, 'Oh, enough of your lies. You've been pouring out nothing but misery and hatred since you first walked among us!'

'God may be in your head, Monk,' said another, 'but he is far from your heart.'

They were approached the Piazza della Signoria now, and others in the crowd took up the triumphant cry.

'We have suffered enough! We shall be free people once more!'

'Soon, the light of life will return to our city!'

'We must punish the traitor! *He* is the true heretic! He twisted the Word of God to suit himself!' a woman shouted.

'The yoke of religious tyranny is broken at last,' another exclaimed. 'Savonarola will at last be punished.'

'The truth illuminates us and fear has fled!' yelled a third. 'Your words hold sway here no more, Monk!'

'You claimed to be His prophet, but your words were dark and cruel. You called us puppets of the devil – I think, perhaps, the true puppet was *you*!'

Ezio and his friends had no need to intercede further – the machinery they had set in motion would do the rest of their work for them. The leaders of the city, as eager to save their own skins as to claw back power for themselves, streamed out of the Signoria to show their support. A stage was erected and on it a huge stack

of kindling and wood was raised around three stakes, while Savonarola and his two most ardent lieutenants were dragged into the Signoria for a brief and savage trial. As he had shown no mercy, no mercy would be shown to him. Soon they reappeared in shackles, were led to the stakes, and bound to them.

'Oh Lord my God, pity me,' Savonarola was heard to plead. 'Deliver me from evil's embrace! Surrounded as I am by sin, I cry out to you for salvation!'

'*You* wanted to burn *me*,' a man jeered. 'Now the tables are turned!'

The executioners put torches into the wood around the stakes. Ezio watched, his mind on his kinsmen who had met their ends so many years ago at this selfsame place.

'*Infelix ego*,' prayed Savonarola in a loud voice filled with pain as the fire began to take. '*Omnium auxilio destitutus*… I have broken the laws of heaven and earth. Which way can I turn? Whom can I run to? Who will take pity on me? I dare not look up to Heaven as I have sinned grievously against it. I can find no refuge on Earth as I have been a scandal to it also…'

Ezio approached, getting as close as he could. Despite the grief he has occasioned me, no man, even this one, deserves to die in such pain, he thought. He extracted his loaded *pistola* from his satchel and attached it to his right-arm mechanism. At that moment, Savonarola noticed him and stared, half in fear and half in hope.

'It's you,' he said, raising his voice above the roar of the fire, but in essence the two communicated by an interconnection of their minds. 'I knew this day would come. Brother, please show me the pity I did not show you. I left *you* to the mercy of wolves and dogs.'

Ezio raised his arm. 'Fare well, *padre*,' he said, and fired. In the pandemonium around the blaze his movement and the noise the gun made went unnoticed. Savonarola's head sank on to his chest. 'Go now in peace, that you may be judged by your God,' said Ezio quietly. '*Requiescat in pace*.' He glanced at the two lieutenant monks, Domenico and Silvestro, but they were already dead, their burst guts spewed out on the hissing fire. The stench of burnt meat was heavy in everyone's nostrils. The crowd was beginning to calm down. Soon, there was little noise other than the crackling of the flames as they finished their work.

Ezio stepped away from the pyres. Standing at a short distance, he saw Machiavelli, Paola and La Volpe watching him. Machiavelli caught his eye and made a small gesture of encouragement. Ezio knew what he had to do. He mounted the stage at the far end from the bonfires and all eyes turned to him.

'Citizens of Florence!' he said in a clarion voice. 'Twenty-two years ago, I stood where I stand now, and watched my loved ones die, betrayed by those I had counted friends. Vengeance clouded my mind. It would have consumed me,

had it not been for the wisdom of a few strangers, who taught me to look beyond my instincts. They never preached answers, but guided me to learn from myself.' Ezio saw that his fellow Assassins had now been joined by Uncle Mario, who smiled and raised a hand in salute. 'My friends,' he continued, 'we don't need anyone to tell us what to do. Not Savonarola, not the Pazzi, not even the Medici. We are free to follow our own path.' He paused. 'There are those who would take that freedom from us, and too many of you – too many of us – alas – gladly give it. But we have it within our power to *choose* – to choose whatever we deem *true* – and it is the exercise of that power which makes us human. There is no book or teacher to give us the answers, to show us a path. So – choose your *own* way! Do not follow me, or anyone else!'

With an inward smile he noticed how disquieted some of the members of the Signoria were looking. Perhaps mankind would never change, but it didn't hurt to give it a nudge. He jumped down, pulled his hood over his head, and walked out of the square, down the street running along the north wall of the Signoria which he had memorably walked down twice before, and vanished from sight.

And there then began for Ezio the last long hard quest of his life before the final confrontation he knew was inevitable. With Machiavelli at his side, he organized his fellows of the Order of the Assassins from Florence and Venice to roam throughout the Italian peninsula, travelling far and wide, armed with copies of Girolamo's map, painstakingly gathering the remaining missing pages of the Great Codex; scouring the provinces of Piedmont, of Trent, of Liguria, Umbria, Veneto, Friuli, Lombardy; of Emilia-Romagna, the Marche, Tuscany, Lazio, Abruzzo; of Molise, Apulia, Campania and Basilicata; and of dangerous Calabria. They spent perhaps too much time in Capri, and crossed the Tyrrhenian Sea to the land of kidnappers, Sardinia, and wicked, gangsterized Sicily. They visited kings and courted dukes, they battled those Templars they encountered on the same mission; but in the end they triumphed.

They reassembled at Monteriggioni. It had taken five long years, and Alexander VI, Rodrigo Borgia, old now, but still strong, remained Pope in Rome. The power of the Templars, though diminished, still posed a grave threat.

Much remained to be done.

28

One morning early in August 1503, Ezio, a man now of forty-four, his temples streaked with grey but his beard still dark chestnut, was bidden by his uncle to join him and the rest of the Company of Assassins there assembled, in his study at his castle of Monteriggioni. Paola, Machiavelli and La Volpe had been joined by Teodora, Antonio and Bartolomeo.

‘It is time, Ezio,’ said Mario solemnly. ‘We hold the Apple and now all the missing Codex pages are collected here together. Let us now finish what you and my brother, your father, started so long ago… Perhaps we can at long last make sense of the prophecy buried within the Codex, and finally break the inexorable power of the Templars for ever.’

‘Then, Uncle, we should begin by locating the Vault. The Codex pages you have reassembled should lead us to it.’

Mario swung back the bookcase to reveal the wall on which the Codex – now in its entirety – hung. Near it, on a pedestal, stood the Apple.

‘This is how the pages relate to one another,’ said Mario as they all took in the complex design. ‘It appears to show a map of the world, but a world bigger than we know, with continents to the west and south which we are unaware of. Yet I am convinced they exist.’

‘There are other elements,’ said Machiavelli. ‘Here, on the left, you can see the traced outline of what can only be a crozier, indeed what may be a Papal staff. On the right is clearly a depiction of the Apple. In the middle of the pages we can now see a dozen dots marked in a pattern whose significance is as yet mysterious.’

As he spoke, the Apple began to glow of its own accord, and finally flashed blindingly, illuminating the Codex pages and seeming to embrace them. Then it

resumed its dull, neutral state.

'Why did it do that – at that precise moment?' asked Ezio, wishing Leonardo had been there to explain, or at least deduce. He was trying to remember what his friend had said about the singular properties of this curious machine, though Ezio didn't know what it was – it seemed to be as much living thing as mechanism. But some instinct told him to trust in it.

'Another mystery to unravel,' said La Volpe.

'How can this map be possible?' asked Paola. 'Undiscovered continents…!'

'Perhaps continents waiting to be rediscovered,' suggested Ezio, but his tone was one of awe.

'How can this be?' said Teodora.

Machiavelli replied, 'Perhaps the Vault holds the answer.'

'Can we see where it is located, now?' asked the ever-practical Antonio.

'Let's look…' said Ezio, examining the Codex. 'If we trace lines between these dots…' He did so. 'They converge, see! On a single location.' He stepped back. 'No! It cannot be! The Vault! It looks as if the Vault is in Rome!' He looked round the assembled company, and they read his next thought.

'It explains why Rodrigo was so anxious to become Pope,' said Mario. 'Eleven years he's ruled the Holy See, but he still lacks the means to crack its darkest secret, though he clearly must know he's at the spot itself.'

'Of course!' said Machiavelli. 'In a sense you have to admire him. He's not only managed to locate the Vault, but by becoming Pope he has control of the Staff!'

'The Staff?' said Teodora.

Mario spoke: 'The Codex always mentioned two "Pieces of Eden" – that is, two *keys* – it can mean nothing else. One –' he turned his eyes to it, '– is the Apple.'

'And the other is the Papal staff!' cried Ezio, in realization. '*The Papal staff is the second "Piece of Eden"!*'

'Precisely,' said Machiavelli.

'My God, you are right!' Uncle Mario barked. He suddenly became grave. 'For years, for decades, we have sought these answers.'

'And now we have them,' added Paola.

'But so, too, might the Spaniard,' put in Antonio. 'We don't know that there aren't copies of the Codex – we don't know that, even if his own collection is incomplete, he nevertheless has enough information to…' He broke off. 'And if he does, if he finds a way into the Vault…' He dropped his voice. 'Its contents will make the Apple seem a trifling thing.'

'Two keys,' Mario reminded them. 'The Vault needs two keys to open it.'

‘But we can’t take any risks,’ said Ezio urgently. ‘I must ride now to Rome and find the Vault!’ No one disagreed. Ezio looked at each of their faces in turn. ‘And what of the rest of you?’

Bartolomeo, who had hitherto remained silent, now spoke, with less than his usual bluffness: ‘I’ll do what I do best – cause some trouble in the Eternal City, some uproar – cause a diversion so you can get on undisturbed.’

‘We’ll all help make the way as clear as possible for you, friend,’ said Machiavelli.

‘Just let me know when you’re ready, *nipote*, and we’ll all be behind you,’ said Mario. ‘*Tutti per uno e uno per tutti!*’

‘*Grazie*, *amici*,’ said Ezio. ‘I know you’ll be there when I need you. But let me carry the burden of this last quest – a lone fish can slip through a net that catches a shoal, and the Templars will be on their guard.’

They made their preparations fast, and soon after halfway through the month, Ezio, the precious Apple in his custody, arrived by boat on the Tiber at the wharfs near the Castel Sant’Angelo in Rome. He had taken every precaution, but by some devilry or the astuteness of Rodrigo’s ubiquitous spies, his arrival did not pass unnoticed, and he was challenged by a squad of Borgia guards at the gates to the wharfs. He would have to fight his way to the Passetto di Borgo, the half-mile-long elevated passage that linked the Castel with the Vatican. Knowing that time was against them, now that Rodrigo must know of his arrival, Ezio decided that a quick, precise attack was his only option. He sprang like a lynx on to the mantle of an ox-drawn cart that was taking barrels from the docks, and skipping on to the higher-most barrel he leapt up to an overhanging gantry. The guards watched open-mouthed as the Assassin launched himself from the gantry – cloak billowing out behind him. Dagger drawn, he slew the Borgia sergeant atop his horse, and relieved him of his mount. The whole manoeuvre had unfolded in less time than it had taken for the remaining guards to draw their swords. Ezio, without looking back, rode off down the Passetto far faster than the Borgia uniforms could pursue him.

As he arrived at his destination, Ezio found that the gate through which he had to enter was too low and narrow for a horseman, so he dismounted and continued through it on foot, dispatching the two men who guarded it with a single deft movement of his blades. Despite his gathering years, Ezio had intensified his training, and was now at the peak of his powers – the pinnacle of his Order, the supreme Assassin.

Beyond the gate he found himself in a narrow courtyard, at the other side of which was yet another gate. It seemed to be unguarded, but as he approached the

lever at its side which he assumed would open it, a cry went up from the ramparts above: ‘*Stop the intruder!*’ Glancing behind him, he saw the gate through which he had entered slamming shut. He was caught in that cramped enclave!

He threw himself on the lever controlling the second gate as the archers ranging themselves above him prepared to fire, and just managed to dash through it as the arrows clattered to the ground behind him.

Now he was inside the Vatican. Moving catlike through its labyrinthine corridors, and melting into the shadows at the merest hint of now alerted guards passing, for he could not afford confrontation which might give his position away, he found himself at last in the vast cave of the Sistine Chapel.

Baccio Pontelli’s masterpiece, built for the Assassins’ old enemy Pope Sixtus IV and completed twenty years earlier, loomed around and above him, the many candles lit at this time just penetrating the gloom. Ezio could make out wall paintings by Ghirlandaio, Botticelli, Perugino and Rosselli, but the great vault of the ceiling had as yet to be decorated.

He had entered by a stained-glass window which was undergoing repair, and he balanced on an interior embrasure overlooking the vast hall. Below him, Alexander VI, in full golden regalia, was conducting the Mass, reading from the Gospel of San Giovanni.

‘*In principio erat Verbum, et Verbum erat apud Deum, et Deus erat Verbum. Hoc erat in pricipio apud Deum. Omnia per ipsum fact sunt, et sine ipso factum est nihil quid factum est.*… In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in the darkness; and the darkness comprehendeth it not. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all men through him might believe. He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light. That was the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not. He came unto his own, and his own received him not. But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth…’

Ezio watched until the service came to its conclusion and the congregation began filing out, leaving the Pope alone with his cardinals and attendant priests. Did the Spaniard know Ezio was there? Did he plan some kind of confrontation? Ezio did not know, but he could see that here was a golden opportunity to rid the

world of this most menacing Templar. Bracing himself, he threw himself outwards and downwards off the embrasure to land close to the Pope in a perfect crouch, springing up immediately, before the man or his attendants could have time to react or call out, and driving his spring-blade hard and deep into Alexander's swollen body. The Pope sank soundlessly to the ground at Ezio's feet and lay still.

Ezio stood over him, breathing hard. 'I thought… I thought I was beyond this. I thought I could rise above vengeance. But I can't. I'm just a man. I've waited too long, lost too much… and you are a canker in the world that should be cut out for everyone's good – *Requiescat in pace*, *sfortunato*.'

He turned to go, but then a peculiar thing happened. The Spaniard's hand curled round the Staff he had been holding. Immediately, it began to glow with a brilliant white light, and as it did so the whole great cavern of a chapel seem to whirl round and round. And the Spaniard's cold cobalt eyes snapped open.

'I'm not quite ready to rest in peace, you pitiful wretch,' said the Spaniard. There was a mighty flash of light and the attendant priests and cardinals, together with those members of the congregation who were still inside the chapel, collapsed, crying out in pain, as curious thin beams of translucent light, smoke-like in the way they curled, emerged from their bodies and travelled into the glowing Staff which the Pope, now standing, held in a grip of steel.

Ezio ran at him, but the Spaniard shouted, 'No you don't, Assassin!' and swung the Staff at him. It crackled in a strange way, like lightning, and Ezio felt himself thrown across the chapel, over the bodies of the moaning and writhing priests and people. Rodrigo Borgia rapped his Staff briskly on the floor by the altar and more smoke-like energy flowed into it – and him – from their hapless bodies.

Ezio picked himself up and confronted his archenemy once more.

'You are a demon!' cried Rodrigo. 'How is it that you can resist?' Then he lowered his eyes and saw that the pouch at Ezio's side, which still contained the Apple, was glowing brightly.

'I see!' said Rodrigo, his eyes glowing like coals. 'You have the Apple! How convenient! Give it to me *now*!'

'*Vai a farti fottere!*'

Rodrigo laughed. 'Such vulgarity! But always the fighter! Just like your father. Well, rejoice, my child, for you will see him again *soon*!'

He swung his Staff again and the crozier's hook smashed against the scar on the back of Ezio's left hand. A shock thrilled through Ezio's veins and he staggered back, but did not fall.

'You *will* give it me,' snarled Rodrigo, closing in.

Ezio thought fast. He knew what the Apple was capable of and he had to take a risk now or die in the attempt. ‘As you wish,’ he replied. He withdrew the Apple from his pouch and held it aloft. It flashed so powerfully that the entire lofty chapel seemed for a moment to be illuminated by bright sunlight, and when the gloom of the candlelight returned, Rodrigo saw eight Ezios ranged before him.

But he remained unruffled. ‘It can make copies of you!’ he said. ‘How impressive. Hard to tell which is the real you, and which a chimera – but that’d be hard at the best of times, and if you think such a cheap conjuring trick is going to save you, think again!’

Rodrigo swung out at the clones, and each time he hit one, it vanished in a puff of smoke. The ghost-Ezios pranced and feinted, lunging at the now worried-looking Rodrigo, but they could do no harm to the Spaniard other than to distract him. Only the real Ezio was able to land any blows – but they were minor glances, such was the power of the Staff, that he was unable to get close enough to the vile Pope. But Ezio quickly realized that the fight was sapping Rodrigo’s strength. By the time the seven ghosts were gone, the repulsive pontiff was tired and out of breath. Madness imparts an energy to the body that few other things can, but despite the powers the Staff imbued in him, Rodrigo was after all a fat old man of seventy-two, and suffering from syphilis. Ezio put the Apple back in its pouch.

Breathless after the fight with the phantoms, the Pope sank to his knees. Ezio, almost equally breathless because his phantoms had necessarily used his energy to disport themselves, stood over him. Looking up, Rodrigo clutched his Staff. ‘You will not take this from me,’ he said.

‘It’s all over, Rodrigo. Put the Staff down and I will grant you a swift and merciful death.’

‘How generous,’ sneered Rodgrio. ‘I wonder if you’d give up in such a supine way if things were the other way round?’

Summoning his strength, the Pope rose abruptly to his feet, at the same time slamming the foot of his Staff against the ground. In the dimness beyond them, the priests and people groaned again and new energy whipped from the staff against Ezio, hitting him like a sledgehammer and sending him flying.

‘How’s that for starters?’ said the Pope, with an evil grin. He walked over to where Ezio lay winded. Ezio started to take the Apple out again but too late, for Rodrigo crushed his hand with his boot and the Apple rolled away. The Borgia stooped to pick it up.

‘At last!’ he said, smiling. ‘And now… to deal with you!’

He held the Apple up and it glowed banefully. Ezio seemed as if frozen, trapped, for he was unable to move. The Pope leaned over him in fury, but then his expression calmed, seeing his adversary completely in his power. From his robes he drew a short-sword, and, looking at his prostrate foe, stabbed him deliberately in the side, with a look of pity mingled with disdain.

But the pain of the wound seemed to weaken the power of the Apple. Ezio lay prone, but watched through a haze of pain as Rodrigo, thinking himself secure, turned and faced Botticelli's fresco of *The Temptation of Christ*. Standing close to it, he raised the Staff. Cosmic energy arced out of it to embrace the fresco, a part of which swivelled opened to reveal a secret door, through which Rodrigo passed after casting one last triumphant look back at his fallen enemy. Ezio watched helplessly as the door closed behind the Pope, and only had time to fix the location of the door before he passed out.

He came to, he knew not how much later, but the candles were burnt low and the priests and people had vanished. He found that although he was lying in a pool of his own blood, the wound Rodrigo had delivered had cut into his side and touched no fatal organ. He got up shakily, leaning against a wall for support and breathing deeply and regularly until his head cleared. He was able to staunch his wound with strips torn from his shirt. He prepared his Codex weapons – the double-blade on the left forearm, the poison-blade on the right – and approached the Botticelli fresco.

He remembered that the door was concealed in the figure, on the right-hand side, of a woman bearing a fardel of wood to the sacrifice. Stepping close, he examined the painting minutely until he had traced the barely visible outline. Then he looked carefully at the details of the painting both to the right and left of the woman. Near her feet was the figure of a child with an upraised right hand, and it was in the tips of the fingers of this hand that Ezio found the button that triggered the door. As it opened, he slipped through it, and wasn't surprised that it snapped shut behind him immediately. He would not think of retreating now in any case.

He found himself in what looked like a catacomb corridor, but, as he cautiously advanced, the rough walls and dirt floor gave way to smoothly dressed stone and a marble floor that would not have disgraced a palace. And the walls glowed with a pale, supernatural light.

He was weak from his wound but he forced himself onwards, fascinated, and more awed than scared, though he was still on his guard, for he knew the Borgia had passed this way.

At last the passageway opened into a large room. The walls were smooth as glass and glowed with the same blue iridescence he'd seen earlier, only here it was more intense. In the centre of the room was a pedestal, and on it rested, in holders clearly designed for them, the Apple and the Staff.

The rear wall of the room was punctuated with hundreds of evenly spaced holes, and before it stood the Spaniard, desperately pushing and poking at the wall, oblivious of Ezio's arrival.

'Open, damn you, *open*!' he cried in frustration and rage.

Ezio came forward. 'It's over, Rodrigo,' he said. 'Give it up. It doesn't make sense any more.'

Rodrigo spun round to face him.

'No more tricks,' said Ezio, releasing his own daggers and throwing them down. 'No more ancient artefacts. No more weapons. Now… let's see what you're made of, *Vecchio*.'

A smile slowly suffused Rodrigo's debauched and broken face. 'All right – if that's how you want to play it.'

He shook off his heavy outer robe and stood in his tunic and hose. A fat, but compact and powerful body, over which little bolts of lightning raced – gained from the power of the Staff. And he stepped forward and landed the first blow – a vicious uppercut to Ezio's jaw that sent him reeling. 'Why couldn't your father leave well enough alone?' asked Rodrigo sorrowfully as he raised his boot to kick Ezio hard in the gut. 'He just had to keep pursuing it, though… And you're just like him. All you Assassins are like mosquitoes to be swatted. I wish to God that idiot Alberti had been able to hang you along with your kinsmen twenty-seven years ago.'

'The evil resides not with us but with *you*, the Templars,' rejoined Ezio, spitting out a tooth. You thought the people – ordinary, decent folk – were yours to play with, to do with as you pleased.'

'But my dear fellow,' said Rodrigo, getting a body-blow in under Ezio's ribs, 'that is what they are there for. Scum to be ruled and used. Always were, always will be.'

'Stand off,' panted Ezio. 'This fight is immaterial. A more vital one awaits us. But tell me first, what do you even want with the Vault that lies beyond that wall? Don't you already have all the power you could possibly need?'

Rodrigo looked surprised. 'Don't you know what lies within? Hasn't the great and powerful Order of the Assassins figured it out?'

His torvid tone stopped Ezio in his tracks. 'What are you talking about?'

Rodrigo's eyes glittered. 'It's God! It's *God* who dwells within the Vault!'

Ezio was too astonished to reply immediately. He knew that he was dealing with a dangerous madman. ‘Listen, do you really expect me to believe that *God* lives beneath the Vatican?’

‘Well, isn’t that a slightly more logical location than a kingdom on a cloud? – Surrounded by singing angels and cherubim? All that makes for a lovely image, but the *truth* is far more interesting.’

‘And what does God do down here?’

‘He waits to be set free.’

Ezio took a breath. ‘Let’s say I believe you – what do you think He’ll do if you manage to open that door?’

Rodrigo smiled. ‘I don’t care. It certainly isn’t His approval I’m after – just His power!’

‘And do you think He’ll give it up?’

‘Whatever lies behind that wall won’t be able to resist the combined strength of the Staff and the Apple.’ Rodrigo paused. ‘They were made for felling gods – whatever religion they belong to.’

‘But the Lord our God is meant to be all-knowing. All-powerful. Do you really think a couple of ancient relics can harm him?’

Rodrigo gave a superior smile. ‘You know nothing, boy. You take your image of the Creator from an old book – a book, mark you, written by *men*.’

‘But you are the Pope! How can you dismiss Christianity’s central text?’

Rodrigo laughed. ‘Are you really so naïve? I became Pope because the position gave me *access*. It gave me *power* ! Do you think I believed a single goddamned word of that ridiculous Book? It’s all lies and superstition. Just like every other religious tract that’s been written since people learned how to put pen to paper!’

‘There are those who would kill you for saying that.’

‘Perhaps. But the thought wouldn’t disturb my sleep.’ He paused. ‘Ezio, we Templars *understand* humanity, and that is why we hold it in such contempt!’

Ezio was speechless, but he continued to listen to the Pope’s ranting.

‘When my work here is finished,’ Rodrigo went on, ‘I think my first order of business will be dismantling the Church, so that men and women may finally be forced to assume responsibility for their actions, and at last be properly *judged*!’ His face became beatific. ‘It will be a thing of beauty, the new Templar world – governed by Reason and Order…’

‘How can you speak of reason and order,’ interrupted Ezio, ‘when your entire life has been governed by violence and immorality?’

‘Oh, I know I am an imperfect being, Ezio,’ simpered the Pope. ‘And I do not pretend otherwise. But, you see, there is no *prize* awarded for morality. You take

what you can get and hold on tight to it – by any means necessary. After all,' he spread his hands, 'you only live once!'

'If everyone lived by your Code,' said Ezio, aghast, 'the entire world would be consumed by madness.'

'Exactly! And as if it hadn't been already!' Rodrigo jabbed a finger at him. 'Did you sleep through your history lessons? Only a few hundred years ago or so our ancestors lived in muck and mire, consumed with ignorance and religious fervour – jumping at shadows, afraid of everything.'

'But we have long since emerged from that and become both wiser and stronger.'

Rodrigo laughed again. 'What a pleasant dream you have! But look around you. You have lived the reality yourself. The bloodshed. The violence. The gulf between the rich and the poor – and that is only growing wider.' He fixed his eyes on Ezio's. 'There will *never* be parity. I've made my peace with that. You should, too.'

'Never! The Assassins will always fight for the betterment of humanity. It may ultimately be unattainable, a Utopia, a heaven on earth, but with every day that the fight for it continues, we move forwards out of the swamp.'

Rodrigo sighed. '*Sancta simplicitas!* You'll forgive me if I've grown tired of waiting for humanity to wake up. I am old, I've seen a lot, and now I've only so many years to live.' A thought struck him and he cackled evilly. 'Though who knows? Perhaps the Vault will change that, eh?'

But suddenly the Apple began to glow, brighter and brighter, until its light filled the room, blinding them. The Pope fell to his knees. Shielding his eyes, Ezio saw that the image of the map from the Codex was being projected on the wall which was dotted with holes. He stepped forward and grasped the Papal Staff.

'*No!*' cried Rodrigo, his claw-like hands futilely gripping the air. 'You can't! You *can't* ! It is *my* destiny. *Mine! I* am the Prophet!'

In a terrifying moment of clear truth, Ezio realized that his fellow Assassins, so long ago in Venice, had seen what he himself had rejected. The Prophet was indeed there, in that room, and about to fulfil *his* destiny. He looked at Rodrigo, almost in pity. 'You never were the Prophet,' he said. 'You poor, deluded soul.'

The Pope sank back, old and gross and pathetic. Then he spoke with resignation. 'The price of failure is death. Give me at least that dignity.'

Ezio looked at him and shook his head. 'No, old fool. Killing you won't bring my father back. Or Federico. Or Petruccio. Or any of the others who have died, either opposing you, or in your impotent service. And for myself, I am done with killing.' He gazed into the Pope's eyes, and they seemed milky now, and afraid,

and ancient; no longer the glittering gimlets of his foe. ‘Nothing is true,’ said Ezio. ’Everything is permitted. It is time for you to find your own peace.’

He turned from Rodrigo and held the Staff up to the wall, pressing its tip into a sequence of the holes spread across it, as the projected map showed him.

And, as he did so, the outline of a great door appeared.

Which, as Ezio touched the final hole, opened.

It revealed a broad passageway, with glass walls, inset with ancient sculptures in stone, marble and bronze, and many chambers filled with sarcophagi, each marked with Runic letters, which Ezio found himself able to read – they were the names of the ancient gods of Rome, but they were all firmly sealed.

As he passed along the passageway, Ezio was struck by the unfamiliarity of the architecture and the decoration, which seemed to be a strange mixture of the very ancient, of the style of his own time, and of shapes and forms he did not recognize, but which his instinct suggested might belong to a distant future. Along the walls there were carved reliefs of ancient events, seeming not only to show the evolution of Man, but the Force which guided it.

Many of the shapes depicted seemed human to Ezio, though in forms and clothing he could not recognize. And he saw other forms, and did not know if they were sculpted, or painted, or part of the ether through which he passed – a forest falling into the sea, apes, apples, croziers, men and women, a shroud, a sword, pyramids and colossi, ziggurats and juggernauts, ships that swam underwater, weird shining screens which seemed to convey all knowledge, all communication…

Ezio also recognized not only the Apple and the Staff, but also a great sword, and the Shroud of Christ, all carried by figures who were human in shape, but somehow not human. He discerned a depiction of the First Civilizations.

And at last, in the depths of the Vault, he encountered a huge granite sarcophagus. As Ezio approached it began to glow, a welcoming light. He touched its huge lid and it lifted with an audible hiss, though featherlight as if glued to his fingers, and slid back. From the stone tomb a wonderful yellow light shone – warm and nurturing as the sun. Ezio shielded his eyes with his hand.

Then, from the sarcophagus, rose a figure whose features Ezio could not make out, though he knew he was looking at a woman. She looked at Ezio with changing, fiery eyes, and a voice came from her too – a voice at first like the warbling of birds, which finally settled into his own language.

Ezio saw a helmet on her head. An owl on her shoulder. He bent his head.

‘Greetings, Prophet,’ said the goddess. ‘I have been waiting for you for ten thousand thousand seasons.’

Ezio dared not look up.

‘It is good that you have come,’ the Vision continued. ‘And you have the Apple by you. Let me see.’

Humbly, Ezio proffered it.

‘Ah.’ Her hand caressed the air over it but she did not touch it. It glowed and pulsated. Her eyes bore into him. ‘We must speak.’ She tilted her head, as if considering something, and Ezio thought he could see the trace of a smile on the iridescent face.

‘Who are you?’ he dared ask.

She sighed. ‘Oh – many names… When I died, it was Minerva. Before that, Merva and Mera… and back again and again through time… Look!’ She pointed to the row of sarcophagi which Ezio had passed. Now, as she pointed at them in turn, each glowed with the pale sheen of moonlight. ‘And my family… Juno, who was before called Uni… Jupiter, who before was named Tinia…’

Ezio was transfixed. ‘You are the ancient gods…’

There was a noise like glass breaking in the distance, or the sound a falling star might make – it was her laughter. ‘No – not gods. We simply came… before. Even when we walked the world, your kind struggled to understand our existence. We were more… advanced in time… Your minds were not yet ready for us…’ She paused. ‘And perhaps they *still* are not… Maybe they never will be. But it is no matter.’ Her voice hardened a fraction. ‘But although you may not comprehend us, you must comprehend our warning…’

She drifted into silence. Into that silence, Ezio said, ‘None of what you are saying makes sense to me.’

‘My child, these words are not meant for you… They are meant for…’ And she looked into the darkness beyond the Vault, a darkness unbounded by walls or time itself.

‘What is it?’ asked Ezio, humbled and frightened. ‘What are you talking about? There’s no one else here!’

Minerva bowed down to him, close to him, and he felt a mother’s warmth embrace all his weariness, all his pain. ‘I do not wish to speak with you but *through* you. You are the Prophet.’ She raised her arms above her and the roof of the Vault became the Firmament. Minerva’s glittering and insubstantial face bore an expression of infinite sadness. ‘You’ve played your part… You anchor Him… But please be silent now… that we may commune.’ She looked sad. ‘Listen!’

Ezio could see all the sky and the stars, and hear their music. He could see the Earth spinning, as if he were looking down from Space. He could make out continents, even, on them, a city or two.

‘When we were still flesh, and our home still whole, your kind betrayed us. We who made you. We who gave you life!’ She paused, and if a goddess can

shed tears, she shed them. A vision of war appeared, and savage humans fought with handmade weapons against their former masters.

'We were strong. But you were many. And both of us craved war.'

A new image of the Earth appeared now, close by, but still seen as from Space. Then it receded, becoming smaller, and Ezio could see it now as just one of several planets at the centre of whose orbits stood a great star – the Sun.

'So busy were we with earthly concerns, we failed to notice the heavens. And by the time we did…'

As Minerva spoke, Ezio saw the Sun flare into a vast corona, shedding unbearable light, light which licked the Earth.

'We gave you Eden. But we had between us created war and death and turned Eden into hell. The world burned until naught remained but ash. It should have ended then and there. But we built you in our image. We built you *to survive*!'

Ezio watched as from the total devastation that seemed to have been wrought upon the Earth by the Sun, a single ash-covered arm thrust skyward from the debris. Great visions of a windswept plain swept across the sky, which was the Roof of the Vault. Across it marched people – broken, ephemeral, but brave.

'And we rebuilt.' Minerva continued. 'It took strength and sacrifice and compassion, but we rebuilt! And as the Earth slowly healed, as life returned to the world, as the green shoots thrust up out of the generous earth once more… We endeavoured to ensure that such a tragedy would never be repeated.'

Ezio looked at the sky again. A horizon. On it, temples and shapes, carvings in stone like writing, libraries full of scrolls, ships, cities, music and dancing – shapes and forms from ancient times and ancient civilizations he didn't know, but recognized as the work of his fellow beings…

'But now we are dying,' Minerva was saying. 'And Time will work against us… Truth will be turned into myth and legend. What we built will be misunderstood. But Ezio, let my words preserve the message and make a record of our loss.'

An image arose of the building of the Vault, and others like it.

Ezio watched, as if in a dream.

'But let my words also bring hope. You must find the other temples. Temples like this. Built by those who knew how to turn away from war. They worked to protect us, to save us from the Fire. If you can find them, if their work can be saved, then so, too, might this world.'

Now Ezio saw the Earth again. The skyline of the Roof of the Vault showed a city like a vast San Gimigmano, a city of the future, a city of towers crushed together which made a twilight of the streets below, a city on an island far away. And then all coalesced once more into a vision of the Sun.

‘But you must be quick,’ said Minerva. ‘For time grows short. Guard against the Templar Cross – for there are many who will stand in your way.’

Ezio looked up. He could see the Sun, burning angrily, as if waiting. And then it seemed to explode, though within the explosion he thought he could discern the Templar Cross.

The vision before him was fading. Minerva and Ezio were left all alone, and the voice of the goddess now seemed to be disappearing down a tunnel of infinite length. ‘It is done… My people must now leave this world… All of us… But the Message is delivered… It is up to you now. We can do no more.’

And then there was darkness and silence, and the Vault became a dark underground room again, with nothing in it at all.

*

Ezio turned back. He re-entered the antechamber and saw Rodrigo lying on a bench, a dribble of green bile oozing from a corner of his mouth.

‘I am dying,’ said Rodrigo. ‘I have taken the poison I kept back for the moment of my defeat, for there is no world for me to live in now. But tell me – tell me before I leave this place of wrath and tears for ever – tell me, in the Vault – what did you see? Whom did you meet?’

Ezio looked at him. ‘Nothing. Nobody,’ he said.

He walked back out, through the Sistine Chapel and into the sunlight, to find his friends waiting there for him.

There was a new world to be made.

Glossary of Italian and Latin terms

abominato filth/wretch
accademico academic
accompagnatrice companions, chaperones
addio goodbye
Ahimè Alas
Aiutami, Dio! Help me, God
Aiuto! Help!
Al ladro! Stop, thief!
Altezza Highness
amici intimi close friends
amico mio my friend
amministratore administrator, manager
amore mio my darling
anche also, too
anch'io me too, same here
Aprite la porta! Open the gate!
Arcivescovo Archbishop
aristocrazia aristocracy
artiglierie artillery
Assassino Assassin

bacino basin (in a dock)
bambina baby
Basta! Enough!
bastardo, *bastardi* bastard/s
bello handsome
ben fatto well done

benvenuti welcome
Birbante! rascal, rogue
biscotti biscuits
bistecca beefsteak
bordello brothel
buona fortuna good luck
buona sera good evening
buon' giorno good morning, good day
buon viaggio safe journey

caffè coffee
calma calm down
campo area
Cane rognoso! Mangy cur!
capitano captain
Capito? Understand?
cappa cloak, cowl
carcassa carcase
Carnevale Carnival
caro, *cara*, *carissima* dearest, darling
casa, dolce casa home, sweet home
castello castle
cazzo! prick/shit
Che vista penosa! What a painful sight!
chiudi il becco shut up
ciao goodbye
ciccione fatty
cimice bedbug
codardo coward
coglioni balls
commandante commander, captain
Commendatore Commander
compagno comrade
condottieri hired soldiers, mercenaries

coniglio! coward, chicken
Cordelie
corno ducale traditional hat worn by the Doges of Venice
così like this
Creapa, traditore! Die, traitor!
crepi il lupo may the wolf die
Curia the Roman law courts

diavolo devil
Distinti saluti sincerely, faithfully (in a letter)
dottore doctor
ducati ducats
duce leader
duchessa duchess
Duomo dome (meaning the cathedral in Florence)

Evviva! hurrah

fidanzato fiance
figa vagina (slang)
Figlio d'un cane! Son of a bitch!
finanziatore financier, backer
fiorini florins
fottiti! fuck you!
Fra' Brother
fratelli brothers
fratellino little brother
funzionario da accoglienza reception, welcoming party

grappa Italian alcoholic drink
grassone bastardo fat bastard
Grazie a Dio Thank God
Grazie, amici Thank you, friends
grullo silly

hospitarius guest-master of monastery

idiota idiot
il Magnifico the Magnificent
il Spagnolo the Spaniard
in bocca al lupo! good luck!
Infame Awful, shocking
Infelix ego omnium auxilio destitutus Unhappy I, bereft of all comfort
in perfetto ordine shipshape
inquisitore inquisitor
intensi certainly/understood

liberta liberty
'Libertà! Libertà! Popolo e libertà!' Liberty! Liberty! The People and Liberty
Luridi branco di cani bastardi! filthy bunch of son-of-bitches
luridi codardi filthy cowards
lurido porco filthy pig

Ma certo! But of course
Ma che? But what's this?
Ma che cazzo? What the fuck was that?
madre mother
Maestro Master
maledetto cursed
marmocchio brat
medico doctor
merda! shit!
Messer Sir
mia colomba my dove
mi dispiace veramente I'm truly sorry
miserabili pezzi di merda miserable piece of shit
molto onorato very honoured

nipote nephew
no preoccuparvi not to worry, don't worry

novizia novice nun

ora di pranzo lunchtime
oste innkeeper

palazzo palace
passeggiata evening stroll
Perdonate, Messere Sorry, sir
piccina little one
piccola small, little
pistola pistol
popolo the people
porco pig
porco demonio! spawn of the devil
principessa princess
promesso promise
puttana whore

Rallegramenti! Congratulations!
Requiescat in pace Rest in peace
ribollita Tuscan soup

salute! bless you!
Sancta simplicitas! What Blessed Simplicity
Sangue di Giuda! Christ on a bicycle
scusi excuse me
se lo tu dici if you say so
Ser Sir
sfortunato unlucky
sì yes
signore Mr, gentleman
Signoria governing authority
signorina miss
signorine plural of signorina
soldo penny

Sono grato del tuo aiuto I'm grateful for your help
sorellina little sister
Spero di sì I hope so
Stai bene All right
Stolti! Fools!
stronzo asshole, prick, etc.
su altezza your highness
subito suddenly

tagliagole cut-throat
tartaruga tortoise, slowcoach
terra ferma dry land
tesora, tesoro sweetheart, treasure
Ti arresto! I arrest you!
traditore traitor
Tutti per uno e uno per tutti! All for one and one for all!

ubriacone drunkard
uomo coraggioso brave man

va bene all right
vecchio old

zio uncle

List of Characters

Giovanni Auditore: father
Maria Auditore: mother
Ezio Auditore: second son of Giovanni
Federico Auditore: eldest son of Giovanni
Petruccio Auditore: youngest son of Giovanni
Claudia Auditore: daughter of Giovanni
Mario Auditore: brother of Giovanni
Annetta: Auditore family housekeeper
Paola: sister of Annetta
Orazio: servant of Mario Auditore
Duccio Dovizi: ex-boyfriend of Claudia
Giulio: secretary to Giovanni Auditore
Dottore Ceresa: family doctor
Gambalto: sergeant in command of Mario Auditore's guards

Cristina Calfucci: girlfriend of the young Ezio
Antonio Calfucci: father of Cristina
Manfredo d'Arzenta: son of wealthy family, later married to Cristina
Gianetta: friend of Cristina
Sandeo: Cristina's father's clerk
Jacopo de' Pazzi: member of Pazzi family, fifteenth-century Florentine bankers
Francesco de' Pazzi: nephew of Jacopo
Vieri de' Pazzi: son of Francesco
Stefano da Bagnone: priest, secretary to Jacopo
Father Giocondo: priest in San Gimignano

Terzago, Tebaldo, Capitano Roberto, Zohane and Bernardo: soldiers and guards in the service of the Pazzi family

Galeazzo Maria Sforza (Galeazzo): Duke of Milan, 1444–76
Caterina Sforza: daughter of Galeazzo, 1463–1509
Girolamo Riario, Duke of Forlì: Caterina's husband, 1443–88
Bianca Riario: daughter of Caterina, 1478–1522
Ottaviano Riario: son of Caterina, 1479–1523
Cesare Riario: son of Caterina, 1480–1540
Giovanni Riario: son of Caterina, 1484–96
Galeazzo Riario: son of Caterina, 1485–1557
Nezetta: wet-nurse to Caterina's baby
Lodovico Sforza: Duke of Milan, brother of Galeazzo, 1452–1508
Ascanio Sforza: cardinal, brother of Galeazzo and Lodovico, 1455–1505

Lorenzo de' Medici, 'Lorenzo the Magnificent': Italian statesman, 1449–92
Clarice Orsini: wife of Lorenzo de' Medici, 1453–87
Lucrezia de' Medici: daughter of Lorenzo de' Medici, 1470–1553
Piero de' Medici: son of Lorenzo de' Medici, 1471–1503
Maddalena de' Medici: daughter of Lorenzo de' Medici, 1473–1528
Giuliano de' Medici: brother of Lorenzo, 1453–78
Fioretta Gorini: mistress of Giuliano de' Medici
Boetio: servant of Lorenzo de' Medici
Giovanni Lampugnani: conspirator in murder of Galeazzo, d. 1476
Carlo Visconti: conspirator in murder of Galeazzo, d. 1477
Gerolamo Olgiati: conspirator in murder of Galeazzo, 1453–77
Bernardo Baroncelli: conspirator in murder of Giuliano de' Medici
Uberto Alberti: Gonfaloniere of Florence (chief official of the Council of Magistrates)
Rodrigo Borgia: Spaniard, cardinal, later Pope Alexander VI, 1451–1503
Antonio Maffei: priest, conspirator in murder of Giuliano de' Medici
Raffaele Riario: Pazzi sympathizer, nephew of the Pope, 1451–1521
Francesco Salviati Riario, Archbishop of Pisa: involved in Pazzi conspiracy
Lodovico and Checco Orsi: Orsi brothers, mercenaries
Niccolò di Bernardo dei Machiavelli: philosopher and writer, 1469–1527

Leonardo da Vinci: artist, scientist, sculptor, etc., 1452–1519
Agniolo and Innocento: assistants to Leonardo da Vinci
Girolamo Savonarola: Dominican priest and political leader, 1452–98
Marsilio Ficino: philosopher, 1433–99
Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: philosopher, 1463–94
Poliziano (Angelo Ambrogini): scholar and poet, tutor to de' Medici children, 1454–94
Botticelli (Alessandro di Moriano Filipepi): artist, 1445–1510
Jacopo Saltarelli: artist's model, b. 1459
Fra Domenico da Pescia and Fra Silvestro: monks, associates of Savonarola
Brother Girolamo: monk at the abbey of Monteciano, cousin of Savonarola

Giovanni Mocenigo: Doge of Venice, 1409–85
Carlo Grimaldi: member of Mocenigo's entourage
Conte de Pexaro: patron of Leonardo in Venice
Nero: official assistant to Conte de Pexaro
Emilio Barbarigo: Venetian merchant, allied to Rodrigo Borgia
Silvio Barbarigo ('Il Rosso'): state inquisitor, cousin of Emilio Barbarigo
Marco Barbarigo: cousin of Silvio and Emilio
Agostino Barbarigo: younger brother of Marco
Dante Moro: Marco's bodyguard
Carlo Grimaldi: in Doge's entourage
Bartolomeo d'Alviano: mercenary

Gilberto the Fox, la Volpe: member of the Assassins
Corradin: the Fox's assistant
Antonio de Magianis: head of thieves' guild in Venice
Ugo: member of thieves' guild
Rosa: member of thieves' guild
Paganino: member of thieves' guild
Michiel: member of thieves' guild
Bianca: member of thieves' guild
Sister Teodora: brothel owner

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ASSASSIN'S CREED®

Brotherhood

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Prologue

The events of the past extraordinary fifteen minutes – which might have been fifteen hours, even days, so long had they seemed – ran through Ezio's head once more as he stumbled, his brain reeling, from the vault beneath the Sistine Chapel.

He remembered, though it seemed like a dream, that in the depths of the vault he had seen a vast sarcophagus made of what looked like granite. As he'd approached it, it had begun to glow, but with a light that was welcoming.

He touched its lid and it had opened, as if as light as a feather. From it a warm, yellow light glowed, and from within that glow a figure rose, whose features Ezio could not make out, although he knew he was looking at a woman. A woman of unnatural stature, who wore a helmet, and on whose right shoulder sat a tawny owl.

The light that surrounded her blinded him.

'Greetings, O Prophet,' she said, calling him by the name which had been mysteriously assigned to him. 'I have been waiting for you for ten thousand thousand seasons.'

Ezio dared not look up.

'Show me the Apple.'

Humbly, Ezio proffered it.

'Ah.' Her hand caressed the air over it but she did not touch it. It glowed and pulsated. Her eyes bore into him. 'We must speak.' She tilted her head, as if considering something, and Ezio, raising his head, thought he could see the trace of a smile on her iridescent face.

'Who are you?'

'Oh – many names have I. When I … died, it was Minerva.'

Ezio recognized the name. 'Goddess of Wisdom! The owl on your shoulder. The helmet. Of course.' He bowed his head.

'We are gone now. The gods your forefathers worshipped. Juno, queen of the gods, and my father, Jupiter, their king, who brought me forth to life through his forehead. I was the daughter, not of his loins, but of his brain!'

Ezio was transfixed. He looked at the statues ranged round the walls. Venus. Mercury. Vulcan. Mars …

There was a noise like glass breaking in the distance, or the sound a falling star might make – it was her laughter. ‘No – not gods. We simply came before. Even when we walked the world, humankind struggled to understand our existence. We were just more advanced in time.’ She paused. ‘But, although you may not comprehend us, you must take note of our warning.’

‘I do not understand.’

‘Don’t be frightened. I wish to speak to you but also *through* you. You are the Chosen One for your time. The *Prophet*.’

Ezio felt a mother’s warmth embrace all his weariness.

Minerva raised her arms and the roof of the vault became the firmament. Her glittering face bore an expression of inexpressible sadness.

‘Listen and see.’

Ezio could hardly bear the memory: he had seen the whole earth and the heavens surrounding it as far as the Milky Way, the galaxy, and his mind could barely comprehend his vision. He saw a world – his world – destroyed by Man, and a windswept plain. But then he saw people – broken, ephemeral, but undismayed.

‘We gave you Eden,’ said Minerva, ‘but it became Hades. The world burned until naught remained but ash. But we created you in our image, and we created you, whatever you did, however much cancerous evil was in you, by choice, because we gave you choice, to survive. And we rebuilt. After the devastation, we rebuilt the world and it has become, after aeons, the world you know and inhabit. We endeavoured to ensure that such a tragedy would never again be repeated.’

Ezio looked at the sky again. A horizon. On it, temples and shapes, carvings in stone like writing, libraries full of scrolls, and ships, and cities, and music and dancing. Shapes and forms from ancient civilizations he didn’t know, but recognized as the work of his fellow beings.

‘But now my people are dying,’ Minerva was saying. ‘And time will work against us … truth will be turned into myth and legend. But Ezio, prophet and leader, though you have the physical force of a mere human, your will ranks with ours, and in you shall my words be preserved.’

Ezio gazed at her, entranced.

‘Let my words also bring hope,’ Minerva continued. ‘But you must be quick, for time grows short. Guard against the Borgia. Guard against the Templar Cross.’

The vault darkened. Minerva and Ezio were alone, bathed in a fading glow of warm light.

‘My people must now leave this world. But the message is delivered. It is up to you now. We can do no more.’

And then there was darkness and silence, and the vault became a mere underground cellar again, with nothing in it at all.

And yet …

Ezio made his way out, glancing at the writhing body of Rodrigo Borgia, the Spaniard, Pope Alexander VI, Leader of the Templar faction – bloody in his apparent death agonies; Ezio could not bring himself, now, to deliver a *coup de grâce*. The man seemed to be dying by his own hand. From the look of him, Rodrigo had taken poison, no doubt the same cantarella he had administered to so many of his enemies. Well, let him find his own way to the *Inferno*. Ezio would not give him the mercy of an easy death.

He made his way out of the gloom of the Sistine Chapel into the sunshine. Once on the portico, he could see his friends and fellow Assassins, members of the Brotherhood, at whose side he had lived so many adventures and survived so many dangers, waiting for him.

Part One

Yet it cannot be called prowess to kill fellow citizens, to betray friends, to be treacherous, pitiless, irreligious. These ways can win a prince power, but never glory.

Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*

1

Ezio stood for a moment, dazed and disorientated. Where was he? What was this place? As he slowly regained his senses, he saw his uncle Mario detach himself from the group of his fellow Assassins and approach him, taking his arm.

'Ezio, are you all right?'

'Th … th … there was a fight – with the Pope, with Rodrigo Borgia. I left him for dead.'

Ezio trembled violently. He could not help himself. Could it be real? Minutes earlier – though it seemed like one hundred years ago – he had been involved in a life-and-death struggle with the man he most hated and feared – the Leader of the Templars, the vicious organization bent on the destruction of the world Ezio and his friends in the Brotherhood of the Assassins had fought so hard to protect.

But he had beaten them. He had used the great powers of the mysterious artefact, the Apple, the sacred Piece of Eden vouchsafed to him by the old gods to ensure that their investment in humanity did not vanish in bloodshed and iniquity. And he had emerged triumphant.

Or had he?

What had he said? 'I left him for dead?' And indeed Rodrigo Borgia, the vile old man who had clawed his way to the head of the Church and ruled it as Pope had indeed seemed to be dying. He had taken poison.

But now a hideous doubt gripped Ezio. In showing mercy, mercy which was at the core of the Assassin's Creed and which should, he knew, be granted to all but those whose life would endanger the rest of mankind, had he in fact been *weak*?

If he had, he would never let his doubt show, not even to his uncle Mario, leader of the Brotherhood. He squared his shoulders. He had left the old man to die by his own hand. He had left him with time to pray. He had not stabbed him through the heart to make sure of him.

A cold hand closed over his heart as a clear voice in his mind said, *You should have killed him.*

He shook himself to get rid of his demons as a dog shakes off water after a swim. But still his thoughts dwelt on his mystifying experience in the strange

vault beneath the Sistine Chapel in Rome's Vatican; the building from which he had just emerged into the blinking, unfamiliar sunlight. Everything around him seemed strangely calm and normal – the buildings of the Vatican stood just as they always had, resplendent in the bright light.The memory of what had just passed in the vault came back to him, great surges of recollection overwhelming his consciousness. There had been a vision, an encounter with a strange goddess – for there was no other way of describing the being – whom he now knew as Minerva, the Roman goddess of Wisdom. She had shown him both the distant past and the far future in such a way as to make him loathe the responsibility that the knowledge he had gained placed on his shoulders.

With whom could he share it? How could he explain *any* of it? It all seemed so unreal.

All he knew for sure after his experience – better to call it an ordeal – was that the fight was not yet over. Perhaps one day there would be a time when he could return to his home town of Florence and settle down with his books, drinking with his friends in winter and hunting with them in autumn, chasing girls in spring and overseeing the harvests on his estates in summer.

But this was not it.

In his heart he knew that the Templars and all the evil they represented were not finished. In them he was pitted against a monster with more heads than the Hydra, and like that beast, which it had taken no less a man than Hercules to slay, all but immortal.

'Ezio!'

His uncle's voice was harsh, but served to make him snap out of the reverie that held him in its clutches. He had to get a grip and think clearly.

There was a fire raging in Ezio's head. He said his name to himself as a kind of reassurance: I am Ezio Auditore da Firenze. Strong, a master of the traditions of the Assassin.

He went over the ground again: He didn't know whether or not he'd been dreaming. The teaching and the revelations of the strange goddess in the vault had shaken his beliefs and assumptions to the core. It was as if time itself had been stood on its head. Emerging from the Sistine Chapel, where he had left the evil Pope, Alexander VI *apparently* dying, he squinted again in the harsh sunlight. His fellow Assassins were gathered around, their faces grave and set with a grim determination.

The thought pursued him still: *should he have killed Rodrigo – made sure of him?* He had elected not to – and the man had seemed bent on taking his own life, having failed in his final goal.

But that clear voice still rang in Ezio's mind.

And there was more: a baffling force seemed to be drawing him back to the chapel – he sensed that there was something left undone.

Not Rodrigo. Not *just* Rodrigo. Though he would finish him now. Something *else*.

‘What is it?’ Mario asked.

‘I must return,‘ Ezio said, realizing afresh, and with a lurching stomach, that the game *wasn’t* over and that the Apple should not yet pass from his hands. As the thought struck him, so he was seized by an overwhelming sense of urgency. Tearing himself free of his uncle’s sheltering arms, he hurried back into the gloom. Mario, bidding the others to stay where they were and keep watch, followed.

Ezio quickly reached the place where he’d left the dying Rodrigo Borgia – but the man wasn’t there! A richly decorated papal damask cope lay in a heap on the floor, flecked with gore, but its owner was gone. Once again the hand, clad in an icy steel gauntlet, closed over Ezio’s heart and seemed to crush it.

The hidden door to the vault was, to all intents and purposes, closed and almost invisible, but as Ezio approached the point where he remembered it had been, it swung open gently at his touch. He turned to his uncle and was surprised to see fear on Mario’s face.

‘What’s in there?’ said the older man, fighting to keep his voice steady.

‘The Mystery,’ Ezio replied.

Leaving Mario on the threshold, he walked down the dimly lit passage, hoping he was not too late and that Minerva would have foreseen this and therefore show mercy. Surely Rodrigo would not have been allowed entry here. Nevertheless, Ezio kept his Hidden Blade, the blade his father had bequeathed him, at the ready.

In the vault, the great *human*, yet at the same time *super-human* figures – were they statues? – stood holding the Staff.

One of the pieces of Eden.

The Staff was apparently welded to the figure that held it, and as Ezio tried to pry it loose, the figure seemed to glow and tighten its grip, as did the Runic inscriptions on the walls of the vault.

Ezio remembered that no human hand should ever touch the Apple unprotected. The figures then turned away, and sank into the ground, leaving the vault void of anything save the great sarcophagus and its surrounding statues.

Ezio stepped back, looking round briefly and hesitating before taking what he instinctively knew would be his final leave of this place. What was he expecting? Was he hoping that Minerva would once more manifest herself to

him? But hadn’t she told him all there was to tell? Or at least all that it was safe for him to know? The Apple had been vouchsafed him. In combination with the Apple, the other pieces of Eden would have accorded Rodrigo the supremacy he craved, and Ezio understood in the fullness of his years that such united power was too dangerous for the hands of Man.

‘All right?’ Mario’s voice, still untypically nervous, floated down to him.

‘All’s well,’ replied Ezio, making his way back to the light with a curious reluctance.

Once reunited with his uncle, Ezio wordlessly showed him the Apple.

‘And the Staff?’

Ezio shook his head.

‘Better in the hands of the Earth than in the hands of Man,’ said Mario with immediate understanding. ‘But you don’t need me to tell you that. Come on, We shouldn’t linger.’

‘What’s the hurry?’

‘Everything’s the hurry. Do you think Rodrigo is just going to sit back and let us stroll out of here?’

‘I left him for dead.’

‘Not quite the same as leaving him good and dead, is it? Come on!’

They made their way out of the vault then, as quickly as they could, and a cold wind seemed to follow them as they did so.

2

‘Where did the others go?’ Ezio asked Mario, his mind still reeling from his recent experiences, as they made their way back to the great nave of the Sistine Chapel. The gathered Assassins were no longer there.

‘I told them to go. Paola has returned to Florence; Teodora and Antonio to Venice. We need to keep ourselves covered throughout Italy. The Templars are broken but not destroyed. They will regroup if our Assassin Brotherhood is not vigilant. Eternally vigilant. The rest of our company have gone ahead and will await us at our headquarters in Monteriggioni.’

‘They were keeping watch.’

‘So they were, but they knew when their duty was done. Ezio, there is no time to waste. We all know that.’ Mario’s face was earnest.

‘I should have made sure of Rodrigo Borgia.’

‘Did he harm you in the fight?’

‘My armour protected me.’

Mario clapped his nephew on the back. ‘I spoke hastily before. I think you were right not to kill needlessly. I have always advised moderation. You thought him as good as dead, by his own hand. Who knows? Perhaps he was faking – or perhaps he failed to give himself a fatal dose of poison. Either way, we must deal with the situation as it is now and not waste energy pondering what might have been. In any case, we sent you – one man against an entire army of Templars. You’ve more than done your part. And I am still your old uncle, and I’ve been worried about you. Come on, Ezio. We have to get out of here. We have work to do, and the last thing we need is to get cornered by Borgia guards.’

‘You wouldn’t believe the things I’ve seen, Uncle.’

‘Just be sure to stay alive, then, that I may hear of them. Listen: I’ve stabled some horses just beyond Saint Peter’s, outside the precincts of the Vatican. Once we reach them we’ll be able to make our way safely from here.’

‘The Borgia will try to stop us, I expect.’

Mario flashed a broad grin. ‘Of course they will – and *I* expect the Borgia to mourn the loss of many lives tonight!’

In the chapel, Ezio and his uncle were surprised to find themselves faced with a number of priests, who had returned to complete the Mass interrupted by Ezio's confrontation with the Pope as he and Rodrigo had battled for control of the Pieces of Eden they had discovered.

The priests confronted them angrily, surrounding them and clamouring, '*Che cosa fate 'qui?* – What are you doing here?' They yelled, 'You have desecrated the sanctity of this Holy Place!' And: '*Assassini!* God will see that you pay for your crimes!'

As Mario and Ezio pushed their way through the angry throng, the bells of Saint Peter's began to ring the alarm.

'You condemn what you do not understand,' said Ezio to a priest who was trying to bar their way. The softness of the man's body repelled him and he shoved him aside as gently as possible.

'We must go, Ezio,' said Mario urgently. '*Now!*'

'His is the voice of the Devil,' another priest's voice rang out.

And another said, 'Turn away from them.'

Ezio and Mario pushed their way through the mob and out into the great courtyard of the church. There they were confronted by a sea of red robes. It seemed that the entire college of cardinals was assembled, confused, but still under the dominion of Pope Alexander VI, Rodrigo Borgia, captain of the Association of the Templars.

'For we wrestle not against flesh and blood,' the cardinals were chanting, 'but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, and the shield of Faith, wherewith you shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked.'

'What's the matter with them?' Ezio asked.

'They are confused. They seek guidance,' Mario replied grimly. 'Come on. We must get away before the Borgia guards take notice of our presence. He looked back towards the Vatican. There was a glitter of armour in the sunlight.

'Too late. Here they come. Hurry!'

3

The billowing vestments of the cardinals formed a sea of red that parted as four Borgia guards pushed through in pursuit of Ezio and Mario. Panic overtook the crowd as the cardinals started shouting in fear and alarm, and Ezio and his uncle found themselves encircled by a human arena. The cardinals, not knowing where to turn, had inadvertently formed a barrier; perhaps their courage was unconsciously bolstered by the arrival of the heavily armoured guards, their breastplates gleaming in the sunlight. The four Borgia soldiers had unsheathed their swords and stepped into the circle to face Ezio and Mario, who in turn drew their blades.

‘Lay down your weapons and surrender, Assassins. You are surrounded and outnumbered!’ shouted the lead soldier, stepping forward.

Before he could utter another word, Ezio had sprung from his stance, energy returning to his weary limbs. The lead guard had no time to react, not expecting his opponent to be so bold in the face of such overwhelming odds. Ezio’s sword arm circled in a blur, the blade whistling as it sliced through the air. The guard tried in vain to raise his sword to parry, but Ezio’s movement was simply too quick. The Assassin’s sword hit its mark with unfaltering accuracy, slicing into the guard’s exposed neck, a plume of blood following its impact. The three remaining guards stood motionless, astonished at the speed of the Assassin and idiotic in the face of such a skilled foe. It was a delay that was to prove their death. Ezio’s blade had barely finished its first lethal arc when he raised his left hand, the mechanism of his hidden blade clicking as the lethal spike appeared from his sleeve. It pierced the second guard between the eyes before he could even twitch a muscle in defence.

Meanwhile Mario, unnoticed, had taken two steps sideways, closing the angle of attack on the two remaining guards, whose attention was still entirely focused on the shocking display of violence unfolding before them. In two more steps, he closed in and heaved his sword under the breastplate of the nearest guard, the point rising up sickeningly into the man’s torso. The guard’s face contorted with confused agony. One man left. With horror in his eyes he turned as if to flee –

but too late. Ezio's blade struck his right flank as Mario's sword sliced into his thigh. The man fell to his knees with a grunt and Mario kicked him over.

The two Assassins looked around – the blood of the guards spread across the paved ground, soaking into the scarlet hems of the cardinals' vestments.

'Let's go before more of Borgia's men reach us.' They brandished their swords at the now terrified cardinals, who quickly fled the Assassins, clearing a path that would lead them from the Vatican. They heard the sound of approaching horses – no doubt more soldiers – as they pushed their way forcefully towards the south-east, running at full speed across the expanse of the plaza, away from the Vatican in the direction of the Tiber. The horses Mario had organized for their escape were tethered just outside the purlieus of the Holy See. But first they had to turn to those Papal Guards who had followed on horseback and who were bearing down on them fast, their thundering hooves echoing on the cobbles. Using their falchions, Ezio and Mario managed to strike away the halberds the guards thrust at them.

Mario cut one guard down just as he was about to stab Ezio from behind with his spear.

'Not bad for an old man,' Ezio cried gratefully.

'I expect you to return the favour,' returned his uncle. 'And not so much of your "old man"!'

'I haven't forgotten everything you taught me.'

'I should hope not. Look out!' Ezio whirled round just in time to slice the legs of a horse from under a guard who'd galloped up wielding a vicious-looking mace.

'*Buona questa!*' shouted Mario. 'Good one!'

Ezio leapt sideways, avoiding two more of his pursuers and managing to unsaddle them as they careered past, carried forward by their own momentum. Mario, heavier and older, preferred to stand his ground and cut at his enemies before leaping out of their reach. But once they had gained the edge of the broad square that faced the great cathedral church of St Peter, the two Assassins quickly clambered to the safety of the rooftops, scaling the crumbling house walls as nimbly as geckos, and scampering across them, leaping over the gaps where the streets between them made canyons. It wasn't always easy, and at one point Mario nearly didn't make it, his fingers scrabbling for the gutters as he fell just short. Panting hard, Ezio doubled back to pull him clear, succeeding just as the crossbow bolts fired by their pursuers rattled uselessly past them into the sky.

But their going was far faster than that of the guards, who, more heavily armoured and lacking the skills of the Assassins, tried in vain to keep up by running though the pathways beneath until gradually they fell back.

Mario and Ezio clattered to a halt on a roof overlooking a small square on the edge of Trastevere. Two large, tough-looking chestnut horses were saddled and ready outside a lowly-looking inn, its battered sign declaring it to be The Sleeping Fox, while being watched over by a wall-eyed hunchback with a bushy moustache.

'Gianni!' hissed Mario.

The man looked up and immediately undid the reins by which the horses were tethered to a huge iron ring set into the wall of the inn. Mario instantly leapt down from the rooftop, landing in a crouch, and from there sprang into the saddle of the nearer, and larger, of the two horses. It whinnied and trod the earth in nervous anticipation.

'Shh, *Campione*,' said Mario to the animal, and then, looking up to where Ezio still stood on the parapet, he yelled, 'Come on! What are you waiting for?'

'Just a minute, *Zio*,' said Ezio, turning to face two Borgia guards who had managed to struggle up to the roof and who were now facing him with – to his astonishment – cocked pistols of a type that was new to him. Where the hell had they got those from? This was no time for questions, though, so he whirled through the air at them, unleashing his Hidden Blade and slicing each neatly through the jugular before they had a chance to fire.

'Impressive,' said Mario, reining in his impatient horse. 'Now, get a move on! *Cosa diavolo aspetti?*'

Ezio threw himself off the roof to land close by the second horse, which was being held firmly by the hunchback, then he rebounded off the ground to spring into the animal's saddle. It reared excitedly under his weight but he immediately had it under control and wheeled it round to follow his uncle as he rode fast towards the Tiber. At the same time Gianni disappeared into the inn, and a detachment of Borgia cavalry tore round the corner into the square. Digging his heels into the horse's flanks, Ezio sped after his uncle as they made their way at breakneck speed through the broken-down streets of Rome towards the dirty, sluggish river. At their backs they could hear the shouts of the mounted Borgia guards, cursing their prey as Mario and Ezio galloped through the maze of ancient streets, slowly pulling further away.

Having reached Tiber Island they crossed the river by a rickety bridge that trembled beneath their horses' hooves, then they doubled back, turning north to ride up the main street leading out of the squalid little town that had once been the capital of the civilized world. They did not stop until they were in the depths of the countryside, and had assured themselves they were out of reach of their pursuers.

Near the settlement of Settebagni, in the shade of a massive elm tree by the side of the dusty road that ran parallel to the river, they reined their horses in and took time to draw breath.

'That was too close, Uncle.'

The older man shrugged and smiled a little painfully. From a saddlebag Mario produced a leather flagon of rough red wine and proffered it to his nephew.

'Here,' he said, slowly catching his breath. 'Good for you.'

Ezio drank, then grimaced. 'Where did you get this?'

'It's the best they can do at The Sleeping Fox,' said Mario, grinning broadly. 'But once we get to Monteriggioni you'll fare better.'

Ezio smiled and passed the flask back to his uncle, but then his features became troubled.

'What is it?' asked Mario in gentler tones.

Slowly, Ezio produced the Apple from the pouch in which he'd stowed it. 'This. What am I to do with it?'

Mario looked grave. 'It is a heavy responsibility. But it is one you must shoulder alone.'

'How can I?'

'What does your heart tell you?'

'My heart tells me to be rid of it. But my brain …'

'It was vouchsafed you … by whatever powers you encountered in the vault,' said Mario solemnly. 'They would not have given it back to mortals if there was not a purpose devised for it.'

'It is too dangerous. If it fell into the wrong hands again …' Ezio looked ominously at the slothful river flowing nearby. Mario watched him expectantly.

Ezio hefted the Apple in his gloved right hand. But still he hesitated. He knew he couldn't throw such a great treasure away, and his uncle's words had swayed him. Surely Minerva would not have allowed him to take back the Apple without reason.

'The decision must be yours alone,' said Mario. 'But if you feel unhappy having custody of it now, give it to *me* for safekeeping. You can take it back later when your mind is calmer.'

Ezio hesitated still, but then they both heard, in the distance, the sound of thundering hooves and the baying of hounds.

'Those bastards don't give up easily,' said Mario through gritted teeth. 'Come, give it to me.'

Ezio sighed, but replaced the Apple in its leather pouch and threw it over to Mario, who quickly stowed it in his saddlebag.

‘And now,’ said Mario, ‘we must jump these nags into the river and swim them across. That’ll put the damned dogs off our scent, and even if they’re bright enough to ford the Tiber themselves, we’ll be able to lose them in the woods over there. Come on. I want to be in Monteriggioni by this time tomorrow.’

‘How hard do you expect to ride?’

Mario dug his heels into his mount’s flanks and the beast reared, foam at the corners of its mouth.

‘Very hard,’ he said. ‘Because from now on we don’t simply have Rodrigo to contend with, his son and daughter are with him – Cesare and Lucrezia.’

‘And they are … ?’

‘The most dangerous people you are ever likely to meet.’

4

It was the afternoon of the following day when the little walled town of Monteriggioni, dominated by Mario's *rocca*, appeared on its hill on the horizon. They had made better time than they'd expected and had now eased their pace to spare the horses.

'… and then Minerva told me about the sun,' Ezio was saying. 'She told of a disaster that happened long ago, and foretold of another which is to come …'

'But not until some time in the future, *vero*?' said Mario. 'Then we need not fret about it.'

'*Si*,' Ezio replied. 'I wonder how much more work we have to do.' He paused reflectively. 'Perhaps it will soon be finished.'

'Would that be so bad?'

Ezio was about to reply when he was interrupted by the sound of an explosion: cannon fire from the direction of the town. He drew his sword, rising in his saddle to scan the ramparts.

'Don't worry,' said Mario, laughing heartily. 'It's only exercises. We've upgraded the arsenal here and installed new cannon all along the battlements. We have training sessions daily.'

'As long as they aren't aiming at us.'

'Don't worry,' said Mario again. 'It's true that the men still need to get their eye in, but they have enough sense not to fire at the boss!'

A short while later they were riding through the open principal gate of the town and up the main thoroughfare that led to the citadel. As they did so, crowds gathered to line the street, looking at Ezio with a mixture of respect, admiration and affection.

'Welcome back, Ezio!' one woman called.

'*Grazie, Madonna*,' Ezio smiled back, inclining his head slightly.

'Three cheers for Ezio!' a child's voice rang out.

'*Buongiorno*, *fratellino*,' Ezio said to him. Turning to Mario, he added, 'It's good to be home.'

'I think they're more pleased to see you than me,' said Mario, but he was smiling as he spoke, and in fact much of the cheering, especially from the older

townsmen, was for him.

‘I’m looking forward to seeing the old family seat again,’ said Ezio. ‘It’s been a while.’

‘It has indeed, and there are a couple of people there who’ll be looking forward to seeing you.’

‘Who?’

‘Can’t you guess? You can’t be that preoccupied with your duties to the Brotherhood.’

‘Of course. You mean my mother and my sister. How are they?’

‘Well, your sister was very unhappy when her husband died, but time heals most things, and I think she’s much better now. In fact, there she is.’

They had ridden into the courtyard of Mario’s fortified residence, and, as they dismounted, Ezio’s sister, Claudia, appeared at the top of the marble staircase that led up to the main entrance and flew down it and into her brother’s arms.

‘Brother!’ she cried, hugging him. ‘Your return home is the best birthday present I could have wished for.’

‘Claudia, my dearest,’ said Ezio, holding her close. ‘It is good to be back. How is our mother?’

‘Well, thanks be to God. She’s dying to see you – we’ve been on tenterhooks ever since the news reached us that you were returning. And your fame goes before you.’

‘Let’s go in,’ said Mario.

‘There’s someone else who’ll be glad to see you,’ continued Claudia, taking his arm and escorting him up the staircase. ‘The Countess of Forlì.’

‘Caterina? Here?’ Ezio tried to keep the excitement out of his voice.

‘We did not know when exactly you would arrive. She and Mother are with the Abbess, but they will be here by sunset.’

‘Business first,’ said Mario knowingly. ‘I am calling a meeting of the Council of the Brotherhood here tonight. Machiavelli, I know, is especially keen to talk to you.’

‘Is it finished, then?’ asked Claudia intently. ‘Is the Spaniard truly dead?’

Ezio’s grey eyes hardened. ‘I will explain everything at the meeting this evening,’ he told her.

‘Very well,’ replied Claudia, but her eyes were troubled as she took her leave.

‘And please give my greetings to the Countess when she returns,’ Ezio called after her. ‘I will see her, and Mother, this evening. First I have business to attend to with Mario which will not wait.’

Once alone, Mario’s tone became serious. ‘You must prepare well for tonight, Ezio. Machiavelli will be here by sunset and I know he has many questions for

you. We will discuss matters now, and then I advise you to take some time off – it won't hurt you to get to know the town a little again.'

After a session of deep conversation with Mario in his study, Ezio made his way back into Monteriggioni. The question of the Pope's survival hung heavily over him and he sought distraction from it. Mario had suggested he visit his tailor to order some new clothes to replace his travel-stained ones, so first he made his way to the tailor's shop, where he found the tailor sitting cross-legged on his workbench, sewing a brocade cloak of a rich emerald green.

Ezio liked the tailor, who was a good-natured fellow a little older than Ezio himself. The tailor greeted him warmly.

'To what do I owe the honour?' he asked.

'I think I'm due some new clothes,' said Ezio a little ruefully. 'Tell me what you think. Be honest.'

'Even if it were not my job to sell you clothes, *signore*, I would have to advise you that a new suit would be the making of you.'

'I thought as much! Very well!'

'I'll measure you now. Then you can pick out the colours you'd like.'

Ezio submitted himself to the tailor's ministrations and chose a discreet dark grey velvet for the doublet, with matching hose in wool.

'Can it be ready by tonight?'

The tailor smiled. 'Not if you want me to do a good job of it, *signore*. But we can try for a fitting towards midday tomorrow.'

'Very well,' replied Ezio, hoping that the meeting he was to attend that evening would not result in his having to leave Monteriggioni immediately.

He was making his way across the town's main square when he noticed an attractive woman struggling with an unwieldy box of red and yellow flowers that was clearly too heavy for her to lift. At that time of day there were few people around, and Ezio had always found it difficult to resist a damsel in distress.

'Can I lend you a hand?' he asked, coming up to her.

She smiled at him. 'Yes, you're just the man I need. My gardener was supposed to pick these up for me, but his wife's sick so he had to go home. As I was passing this way I thought I'd fetch them, but this box is way too heavy for me. Do you think you could … ?'

'Of course.' Ezio stooped and hefted the box onto his shoulder. 'So many flowers. You're a lucky woman.'

'Even luckier now that I've run into you.'

There was no doubt that she was flirting with him. 'You could have asked your husband to fetch them for you, or one of your other servants,' he said.

‘I have only one other servant and she isn’t half as strong as I am,’ replied the woman. ‘And as for a husband – I have none.’

‘I see.’

‘I ordered these flowers for Claudia Auditore’s birthday.’ The woman looked at him.

‘That sounds like fun.’

‘It will be.’ She paused. ‘In fact, if you’d like to help me out some more, I’m looking for someone with a bit of class to escort me to the party.’

‘Do you think I have enough class?’

She was bolder now. ‘Yes! No one in this entire town walks with greater bearing than you, sir. I am sure Claudia’s brother, Ezio himself, would be impressed.’

Ezio smiled. ‘You flatter me. But what do you know of this Ezio?’

‘Claudia – who is a particular friend of mine – thinks the world of him. But he rarely visits her, and from what I can gather he’s rather distant.’

Ezio decided it was time to come clean. ‘It’s true, alas – I have been … distant.’

The woman gasped. ‘Oh no! *You* are Ezio! I don’t believe it. Claudia did say you were expected back. The party’s supposed to be a surprise for her. Promise you won’t say a word.’

‘You’d better tell me who you are now.’

‘Oh, of course. I am Angelina Ceresa. Now promise.’

‘What will you do to keep me quiet?’

She looked at him archly. ‘Oh, I’m sure I can think of several things.’

‘I’m longing to hear what they are.’

They had reached the door of Angelina’s house by this time. Angelina’s elderly housekeeper opened it to them and Ezio placed the box of flowers on a stone bench in the courtyard. He faced Angelina and smiled.

‘Now, are you going to tell me?’

‘Later.’

‘Why not now?’

‘*Signore*, I assure you it will be worth the wait.’

Little did either of them know that events would overtake them, and that they would not meet again.

Ezio took his leave and, seeing that the day was drawing in, directed his walk back towards the citadel. As he was approaching the stables he noticed a little girl wandering down the middle of the street, apparently alone. He was about to speak to her when he was interrupted by the sound of frantic shouting and the thunder of horse’s hooves. Quicker than thought, he snatched up the child and

moved her to the shelter of a doorway. He was in the nick of time, too, as around the corner galloped a powerful war horse, fully harnessed but riderless. In less than hot pursuit, and on foot, came Mario's stable master, an elderly man called Federico, whom Ezio recognized.

'*Torna qui, maledetto cavallo!*' yelled Federico helplessly after the disappearing horse. Seeing Ezio, he said. 'Can you help me please, sir? It's your uncle's favourite steed. I was just about to unsaddle and groom him but something must have scared him; he's very highly strung.'

'Don't worry, I'll try and get him back for you.'

'Thank you, thank you.' Federico mopped his brow. 'I'm getting too old for this.'

'Don't worry. Just stay here and keep an eye on this child – I think she's lost.'

'Surely.'

Ezio raced off after the horse, which he found without difficulty. It had calmed down and was grazing on some hay that had been loaded onto a parked wagon. It baulked slightly when Ezio approached, but then recognized him and didn't run. Ezio laid a comforting hand on its neck and patted it reassuringly before taking its bridle and leading it gently back the way they had come.

On the way, he had the opportunity to do another good deed when he encountered a young woman, frantic with anxiety, who turned out to be the mother of the lost little girl. Ezio explained what had happened, taking care to tone down the degree of danger the little girl had been in. Once he'd told her where the girl was, she ran ahead of him, calling out her child's name – 'Sophia! Sophia!' – and Ezio heard an answering cry of 'Mamma!' Minutes later he had rejoined the little group and handed the reins over to Federico who, thanking him again, begged him not to say anything to Mario. Ezio promised not to and Federico led the horse back to the stables.

The mother was still waiting with her daughter and Ezio turned to them with a smile.

'She wants to say thank you,' said the mother.

'Thank you,' said Sophia dutifully, looking up at him with a mixture of awe and trepidation.

'Stay with your mother in future,' said Ezio kindly. 'Don't leave her like that, *capisco*?'

The little girl nodded mutely.

'We'd be lost without you and your family to watch over us, *signore*,' said the mother.

'We do what we can,' Ezio said, but his thoughts were troubled as he entered the citadel. Even though he was pretty sure he could stand his ground, he wasn't

looking forward to his encounter with Machiavelli.

*

There was still time enough before the meeting, so to avoid brooding on the course it might take, and from natural curiosity, Ezio climbed the ramparts to take a closer look at the new cannon Mario had installed and of which he was so proud. There were several of them, all beautifully chased in cast bronze and each with a pile of iron cannonballs neatly stacked beside its wheels. The biggest cannon had barrels ten feet long, and Mario had told him that these weighed as much as 20,000 pounds, but there were also lighter, more easily manoeuvrable culverins interspersed with them. In the towers that punctuated the walls were saker cannon on cast-iron mounts, as well as lightweight falconets on wooden trolleys.

Ezio approached a group of gunners who were clustered round one of the bigger guns.

'Handsome beasts,' he said, running a hand over the elaborately chased decoration around the touch hole.

'Indeed they are, *Messer* Ezio,' said the leader of the group, a rough-hewn master sergeant whom Ezio remembered from his first visit to Monteriggioni as a young man.

'I heard you practising earlier. May I try firing one of these?'

'You can indeed, but we were firing the smaller cannon earlier. These big 'uns are brand new. We don't seem to have got the trick of loading 'em yet, and the master armourer who's supposed to be installing them seems to have taken off.'

'Have you got people looking for him?'

'Indeed we have, sir, but no luck so far.'

'I'll have a look round, too. After all, these things aren't here for decoration and you never know how soon we'll need them.'

Ezio set off, continuing his rounds of the ramparts. He hadn't gone more than another twenty or thirty yards when he heard a loud grunting from a wooden shed that had been erected on the top of one of the towers. Near by, outside, lay a box of tools, and as he approached the grunts resolved themselves into snores.

It was dark and hot inside the shed, and smelled appallingly of stale wine. As his eyes grew accustomed to the dim light, Ezio quickly made out the form of a large man in his none-too-clean shirtsleeves spreadeagled on a pile of straw. He gave the man a gentle kick, but its only effect was to make the man splutter, come half awake, then turn over with his face to the wall.'

‘*Salve, Messere*,’ Ezio said, jostling the man again, less gently this time, with the toe of his boot.

The man twisted his head round to look at him and opened one eye. ‘What is it, friend?’

‘We need you to fix the new cannon on the battlements.’

‘Not today, chum. First thing.’

‘Are you too drunk to do your job? I don’t think Captain Mario would be very happy if he got wind of that.’

‘No more work today.’

‘But it’s not that late. Do you know what time it is?’

‘No. Don’t care either. Make cannon, not clocks.’

Ezio had squatted down to speak to the man, who in turn had pulled himself into a sitting position and was treating Ezio to a gale of his breath, pungent with garlic and cheap Montalcino, as he belched luxuriously. Ezio drew himself to his feet.

‘We need those cannon ready to be fired and we need them ready now,’ he said. ‘Do you want me to find someone else who’s more capable than you?’

The man scrambled to his feet. ‘Not so fast, friend. No other man’s going to lay a hand on my guns.’ He leaned on Ezio as he got his breath back. ‘You don’t know what it’s like – some of these soldiers, they got no respect for artillery. New-fangled stuff for a lot of ’em, of course, grant you that, but I ask you. They expect a gun to work like magic, just like that! No sense of coaxing a good performance out of ’em.’

‘Can we talk as we walk?’ said Ezio. ‘Time isn’t standing still, you know.’

‘Mind you,’ the master armourer continued, ‘these things we’ve got here, they’re in a class of their own. Nothing but the best for Captain Mario – but they’re still pretty simple. I’ve got hold of a French design for a hand-held gun. They call it a wrought-iron murderer. Very clever. Just think, hand-held cannon. That’s the future, chum.’

By now they were approaching the group surrounding the cannon.

‘You can call off the hunt,’ said Ezio cheerfully. ‘Here he is.’

The master sergeant eyed the armourer narrowly. ‘Up to it, is he?’

‘I may be a little the worse for wear,’ retorted the armourer, ‘but I am a peaceful man at heart. In these times, encouraging the sleeping warrior in my gut is the only way to stay alive. Therefore it is my duty to drink.’ He pushed the sergeant aside. ‘Let’s see what we’ve got here …’

After examining the cannon for a few moments, the master-armourer rounded on the soldiers. ‘What have you been doing? You’ve been tampering with them,

haven’t you? Thank God you didn’t fire one: you could have got us all killed. They’re not ready yet. Got to give the bores a good clean first.’

‘Perhaps with you around we won’t need cannon after all,’ the sergeant told him. ‘We’ll just get you to breathe on the enemy!’

But the armourer was busy with a cleaning rod and wads of coarse, oily cotton. When he’d finished, he stood up and eased his back.

‘There, that’s done it,’ he said. Turning to Ezio, he continued, ‘Just get these fellows to load her – that’s something they can do, though God knows it took ’em long enough to learn – and you can have a go. Look over there on the hill. We set some targets up on a level with this gun. Start by aiming at something on the same level, that way, if the cannon explodes, at least it won’t take your head off with it.’

‘Sounds reassuring,’ said Ezio.

‘Just try it, *Messer*. Here’s the fuse.’

Ezio placed the slow match on the touch hole. For a long moment nothing happened, then he sprang back as the cannon bucked and roared. Looking across to the targets, he could see that his ball had shattered one of them.

‘Well done,’ said the armourer. ‘*Perfetto!* At least one person here, apart from me, knows how to shoot.’

Ezio had the men reload and fired again, but this time he missed.

‘Can’t win ’em all,’ said the armourer. ‘Come back at dawn. We’ll be practising again then and it’ll give you a chance to get your eye in.’

‘I will,’ said Ezio, little realizing that when he next fired a cannon, it would be in deadly earnest.

5

When Ezio entered the great hall of Mario's citadel, the shadows of evening were already gathering and servants were beginning to light torches and candles to dispel the gloom. The gloom accorded with Ezio's increasingly sombre mood as the hour of the meeting approached.

So wrapped up in his own thoughts was he that he didn't at first notice the person hovering by the massive fireplace, her slight but strong figure dwarfed by the giant caryatids that flanked the chimney. So he was startled when the woman approached him and touched his arm. As soon as he recognized her, his features softened into an expression of pure pleasure.

'*Buonasera*, Ezio,' she said, a little shyly for her, he thought.

'*Buonasera*, Caterina,' he replied, bowing to the Countess of Forlì. Their former intimacy was some way in the past, though neither of them had forgotten it, and when she'd touched his arm, both of them, Ezio thought, had felt the chemistry of the moment. 'Claudia told me you were here, and I have been looking forward to seeing you. But …' he hesitated. 'Monteriggioni is far from Forlì, and …'

'You needn't flatter yourself that I have come all this way just on your account,' she said with a trace of her former sharpness, though he could see by her smile that she was not entirely serious. It was then he realized he was still drawn to this fiercely independent and dangerous woman.

'I am always willing to be of service to you, *Madonna* – in any way I can.' He meant it.

'Some ways are harder than others,' she countered, and now there was a tough note in her voice.

'What is it?'

'It is not a simple matter,' continued Caterina Sforza. 'I come in search of an alliance.'

'Tell me more.'

'I am afraid your work is not over yet, Ezio. The papal armies are marching on Forlì. My dominion is small, but fortunately – or unfortunately for me – it lies in an area of the utmost strategic importance to whomever controls it.'

‘And you desire my help?’

‘My forces on their own are weak – your *condottieri* would be a great asset to my cause.’

‘This is something I will have to discuss with Mario.’

‘He will not refuse me.’

‘And nor will I.’

‘By helping me you will not just be doing me a good deed, you will be taking a stand against the forces of evil against which we have always been united.’

As they spoke, Mario appeared. ‘Ezio, *Contessa*, we are gathered and await you,’ he said, his face unusually serious.

‘We will talk more of this,’ Ezio told her. ‘I am bidden to a meeting which my uncle has convened. I am expected to explain myself, I think. But let us arrange to see each other afterwards.’

‘The meeting concerns me, too,’ said Caterina. ‘Shall we go in?’

6

The room was very familiar to Ezio. There, on the now-exposed inner wall, the pages of the Great Codex were arranged in order. The desk, usually littered with maps, was cleared, and around it, on severe straight-backed chairs of dark wood, sat those members of the Assassin Brotherhood who had gathered at Monteriggioni, together with those of the Auditore family who were privy to its cause. Mario sat behind his desk, and at one end sat the sober, dark-suited man, still young looking, but with deep lines of thought etched into his forehead, who had become one of Ezio's closest associates, as well as one of his most unremitting critics: Niccolò Machiavelli. The two men nodded guardedly at one another as Ezio greeted Claudia and his mother, Maria Auditore, matriarch of the family since his father's death. Maria hugged her only surviving son hard, as if her life depended on it, and looked at him with shining eyes as he broke free and took a seat near Caterina and opposite Machiavelli, who now rose and looked questioningly at him. Clearly there was going to be no polite prologue to the matter in hand.

'First, perhaps, I owe you an apology,' began Machiavelli. 'I was not present in the vault and urgent business took me to Florence before I could truly analyse what happened there. Mario has given us his account, but yours alone can be the full one.'

Ezio rose and spoke simply and directly. 'I entered the Vatican, where I encountered Rodrigo Borgia, Pope Alexander VI, and confronted him. He was in possession of one of the Pieces of Eden, the Staff, and used it against me. I managed to defeat him and, using the combined powers of the Apple and the Staff, gained access to the secret vault, leaving him outside. He was in despair and begged me to kill him. I would not.' Ezio paused.

'What then?' prompted Machiavelli as the others watched silently.

'Within the vault were many strange things – things not dreamt of in our world.' Visibly moved, Ezio forced himself to continue in level tones. 'A vision of the goddess Minerva appeared to me. She told of a terrible tragedy that would befall mankind at some future time, but she also spoke of lost temples which may, when found, aid us and lead us to a kind of redemption. She appeared to

invoke a phantom, which had some close connection with me, but what that was I cannot tell. After her warning and predictions, she vanished. I emerged to see the Pope dying – or so it seemed; he appeared to have taken poison. Later something compelled me to return. I seized the Apple, but the Staff, which may have been another Piece of Eden, was swallowed up by the earth. I am glad of it: the Apple alone, which I have given in custody to Mario, is already more than I personally wish to have responsibility for.'

'Amazing!' cried Caterina.

'I cannot imagine such wonders,' added Claudia.

'So the vault did not house the terrible weapon we feared – or at any rate, the Templars did not gain control of it. This at least is good news,' said Machiavelli evenly.

'What of this goddess – Minerva?' Claudia asked. 'Did she appear … like us?'

'Her appearance was human, and also superhuman,' Ezio said. 'Her words proved that she belonged to a race far older and greater than ours. The rest of her kind died many centuries ago. She had been waiting for that moment for a long time. I wish I had the words to describe the magic she performed.'

'What are these temples she spoke of?' put in Mario.

'I know not.'

'Did she say we should search for them? How do we know what to look for?'

'Perhaps we should … perhaps the quest will show us the way.'

'The quest must be undertaken,' said Machiavelli crisply. 'But we must clear the path for it first. Tell us of the Pope. He did not die, you say?'

'When I returned to the vault, his cope lay on the chapel floor. He himself had disappeared.'

'Had he made any promises? Had he shown repentance?'

'Neither. He was bent on gaining the Power. When he saw he was not going to get it, he collapsed.'

'And you left him to die.'

'I would not be the one to kill him.'

'You should have done so.'

'I am not here to debate the past. I stand by my decision. Now, we should discuss the future. What we are to do.'

'What we are to do is made all the more urgent by your failure to finish off the Templar leader when you had the chance.' Machiavelli breathed hard, but then relaxed a little. 'All right, Ezio. You know in what high esteem we all hold you. We would not have got anything like this far without the twenty years' devotion you have shown to the Assassin Brotherhood and our Creed. And a part of me applauds you for not having killed when you deemed it unnecessary to do so.

That is also in keeping with our code of honour. But you misjudged, my friend, and that means we have an immediate and dangerous task ahead of us.' He paused, scanning the assembled company with eagle eyes. 'Our spies in Rome report that Rodrigo is indeed a reduced threat. He is at least somewhat broken in spirit. There is a saying that it is less dangerous to do battle with a lion's whelp than with an old, dying lion; but in the case of the Borgia the position is quite otherwise. Rodrigo's son, Cesare, is the man we must match ourselves against now. Armed with the vast fortune the Borgia have amassed by fair means and foul – but mostly foul' – here Machiavelli allowed himself a wry smile – 'he heads a large army of highly trained troops, and with it he intends to take over all Italy – the whole peninsula – and he does not intend to stop at the borders of the Kingdom of Naples.'

'He would never dare – he could never do it!' Mario roared.

'He would and he could,' snapped Machiavelli. 'He is evil through and through, and as dedicated a Templar as his father the Pope ever was, but he is also a fine though utterly ruthless soldier. He always wanted to be a soldier, even after his father made him Cardinal of Valencia when he was only seventeen years old. As we all know he resigned from that post, making him the first cardinal in the Church's history to do so. The Borgia treat our country and the Vatican as if they were their own private fiefdom. Cesare's plan now is to crush the north first, to subdue the Romagna and isolate Venice. He also intends to extirpate and destroy all of us remaining Assassins, since he knows that in the end we are the only people who can stop him. "Aut Cesar, Aut Nihil" – that's his motto – "either you're with me or you're dead". And do you know I think the madman actually believes it.'

'My uncle mentioned a sister,' Ezio began.

Machiavelli turned to him. 'Yes. Lucrezia. She and Cesare are … how shall I say? Very close. They are a very close-knit family; when they are not killing those other brothers and sisters, husbands and wives, whom they find inconvenient to them, they are … coupling with each other.'

Maria Auditore could not suppress a cry of disgust.

'We must approach them with all the caution we would use to approach a nest of vipers,' Machiavelli concluded. 'And God knows where and how soon they will next strike.' He paused and drank half a glass of wine. 'And now, Mario, I leave you. Ezio, we will meet again soon, I trust.'

'You're leaving this evening?'

'Time is of the essence, good Mario. I ride for Rome tonight. Farewell.'

The room was silent once Machiavelli had left. After a long pause, Ezio said bitterly, 'He blames me for not killing Rodrigo when I had the chance.' He

looked round at them. ‘You all do.’

‘Any of us might have made the decision you made,’ said his mother. ‘You were sure he was dying.’

Mario came and put an arm round his shoulders. ‘Machiavelli knows your value; we all do. And even with the Pope out of the way, we’d still have had to deal with his brood.’

‘But if I had cut off the head, could the body have survived?’

‘We must deal with the situation as it is, good Ezio, not with it as it might have been.’ Mario clapped him on the back. ‘And now, as we are in for a busy day tomorrow, I suggest we dine and prepare for an early night!’

Caterina’s eyes met Ezio’s. Did he imagine it, or was there a flicker of lust there? He shrugged inwardly. Perhaps he was just imagining it.

7

Ezio ate lightly – just *pollo ripieno* with roasted vegetables – and he drank his Chianti cut half and half with water. There was little conversation at dinner, and he answered his mother's string of questions politely but laconically. After all the tension that had mounted in anticipation of the meeting, and which had now melted away, he was very tired. He had barely had a chance to rest since leaving Rome, and it looked now as if it would be a long time still before he could realize his long-cherished ambition of spending some time back in his old home in Florence, reading and walking in the surrounding gentle hills.

As soon as he decently could, Ezio made his excuses to the company and set off for his bedroom, a large, quiet, dimly lit space on one of the upper floors, with a view across the countryside rather than the town. Once he'd reached it and dismissed the servant, he let go of the steeliness that had supported him throughout the day; his body slumped, his shoulders sagged and his walk eased. His movements were slow and deliberate. He moved across the room to where the servant had already drawn him a bath. As he approached it, he tugged at his boots and took off his clothes and, once naked, he stood for a moment, his clothes bundled in his hands, before a full-length mirror on a stand near the copper tub. He looked at his reflection with weary eyes. Where had the last four long decades gone? He straightened. He was older, stronger even, certainly wiser, but he could not deny the profound fatigue he felt.

Ezio threw his clothes onto the bed. Under it, in a locked elm chest, were the secret Codex weapons that Leonardo da Vinci had fashioned for him. He would check them over first thing in the morning, after the council of war he'd be holding with his uncle. The original Hidden Blade never left him except when he was naked, and even then he kept it within arm's reach. He wore it always; it had become part of his body.

Sighing with relief, Ezio slipped into the bath. Immersed up to his neck in the hot water, breathing in the gently scented steam, he closed his eyes and let out a long, slow breath of relief. Peace at last. He had better make the most of the few short hours he had of it.

He had just dozed off and begun to dream when the softest of noises – the door opening and closing behind its heavy, tapestry hanging – caused him to wake. He was instantly alert, like a wild animal. Silently his hand sought the blade and with a practised movement he attached it to his wrist. Then, in one fluid motion, he turned and stood upright in the tub, poised for action and looking in the direction of the door.

'Well,' said Caterina, grinning as she approached. 'You certainly haven't lost any inches with the years.'

'You have the advantage of me, *Contessa*,' smiled Ezio. 'You are fully clothed.'

'I expect we could arrange something to change that. But I am waiting.'

'Waiting for what?'

'For you to say that you don't really need to see for yourself. For you to say that you are sure, even without seeing my naked body, that Nature has been as kind to me, if not kinder, as she has been to you.' Her grin broadened at Ezio's confusion. 'But I remember you were never as good at paying compliments as you were at ridding the world of Templars.'

'Come here!'

He drew her to him, pulling at the girdle of her skirt as her fingers flew first to the blade, detaching it, and then to the laces of her bodice. Seconds later he had lifted her into the bath with him, their lips glued to one another's and their naked limbs entwined.

They did not linger long in the bath, but soon got out, drying each other on the rough linen towels the servant had left. Caterina had brought a phial of scented massage oil with her and drew it from a pocket in her dress.

'Now, lie on the bed,' she said. 'I want to make sure you are good and ready for me.'

'Surely you can see that I am.'

'Indulge me. Indulge yourself.'

Ezio smiled. This was better than sleep. Sleep could wait.

Sleep, Ezio found, was obliged to wait three hours, at which point Caterina curled up in his arms. She fell asleep before him and he watched her for a while. Nature had indeed been kind to her. Her slender yet curvaceous body, with its narrow hips, broad shoulders and small but perfect breasts, was still that of a twenty-year-old, and her cloud of fine light red hair that tickled his chest as she laid her head on it carried the same scent that had driven him wild all those years ago. Once or twice in the depths of the night, he woke to find he had rolled away from her, and when he took her in his arms again, she nestled up to him without

waking, giving a tiny sigh of joy and closing her hand around his forearm. Ezio wondered later if this hadn't been the best night of love in his life.

They overslept, of course, but Ezio was not about to forego another bout in favour of cannon practice, even though a part of his mind reproved him for this. In the background he could distantly hear the sounds of marching – clattering men moving at a running march – and shouted orders, followed by the boom of cannon.

'Target practice with the new cannon,' said Ezio when, for a moment, Caterina stopped and looked at him quizzically. 'Manoeuvres. Mario's a hard taskmaster.'

The heavy brocade curtains across the windows shut out most of the light and the room remained cocooned in comfortable dimness; no servant came to disturb them. Soon, Caterina's moans of pleasure drowned out any other noise to his ear. His hands tightened around her strong buttocks, and she was pulling him up urgently towards her when their lovemaking was interrupted by more than just the roar of cannon.

Suddenly the peace and the softness of the room was shattered. The windows blew away with a mighty roar, taking a part of the stone outer wall with them, as a gigantic cannonball smashed in and landed, boiling hot, inches from the bed. The floor sagged under its weight.

Ezio had instinctively thrown himself protectively over Caterina at the first sign of danger, and in that moment the lovers transformed themselves into professionals and colleagues – if they were to remain lovers, they first had to survive.

They leapt from the bed, throwing on their clothes. Ezio noticed that apart from the delicious phial of oil, Caterina touted a very useful jagged-edged dagger beneath her skirts.

'What the hell … ?' Ezio cried.

'Go and find Mario,' said Caterina urgently.

Another ball flew in, shattering the beams over their recently vacated bed and smashing it to pieces.

'My troops are in the main courtyard,' said Caterina. 'I'll find them and get around the back of the citadel to see if we can't outflank them. Tell Mario that's what I've decided.'

'Thank you,' said Ezio. 'Stay out of sight.'

'I wish I'd had time to change,' she said, laughing. 'We'd better book into an *albergo* next time, eh?'

'Let's make damned sure there *is* a next time,' rejoined Ezio, laughing too, but nervously, as he strapped on his sword.

‘You bet! *Arrivederci!*’ cried Caterina, rushing from the room without forgetting to blow him a kiss.

He looked at the ruins of the bed. The Codex weapons – the Double Blade, the Poison Blade and the Pistol – were buried beneath it, in all probability destroyed. At least he still had his Hidden Blade. Even *in extremis* he would never forget that – his murdered father’s last bequest.

8

Ezio had no idea what time it was, but experience told him attacks usually began at dawn, when the victims were still confused and wiping the sleep from their eyes. He was lucky that his training had bestowed on him, even having reached the age of forty, the alertness and agility of a wildcat.

Once outside and on the battlements he scanned the surrounding landscape. The town below him was in flames in many quarters. He saw the tailor's shop burning, and Angelina's house too. There would be no birthday party for poor Claudia tonight.

He ducked as another cannonball smashed into the ramparts. For God's Love, what guns were their attackers bringing to bear? How could they reload and fire so fast? And who was behind this?

Through the smoke and dust he made out Mario, dodging crumbling masonry as he came towards him. Ezio leapt off the ramparts, landing in a crouch near Mario, and ran to join him.

'Uncle! *Che diavolo … ?*'

Mario spat. 'They've caught us on the back foot. It's the Borgia!'

'*Fottere!*'

'We underestimated Cesare. They must have massed to the east during the night.'

'What must we do?'

'The main thing is to get all the townspeople clear – those who haven't already been killed. We've got to hold them off until we've done that. If they take the town with the people still inside it, they'll kill them all: everyone in Monteriggioni is either an Assassin or an Assassin's abettor, in their eyes.'

'I know the route out. Leave it to me.'

'Good man. I'll muster our defenders and give them everything we've got.' Mario paused. 'Look. Let's take them on first. You go and command the cannon on the ramparts.'

'And you?'

'I'll lead a frontal assault. Take the battle to the bastards.'

'Caterina is going to try to take her forces around the flank.'

‘Good. Then we are in with a chance. Now hurry!’

‘Wait!’

‘What is it?’

Ezio lowered his voice. ‘Where is the Apple?’ He did not tell his uncle that the Codex weapons had been destroyed by one of the first cannonades. Inwardly he prayed that, by some miracle, his path would cross Leonardo’s again, for he did not doubt that the Master of all the arts and sciences would help him reconstruct them, in case of need. In the meantime, he had the Hidden Blade still, and he was a past master in the use of conventional weapons.

‘The Apple is safe,’ Mario reassured him. ‘Now go. And if you see that the Borgia show the slightest chance of breaching the walls, shift your attention to evacuating the town. Do you understand?’

‘*Si, zio mio*.’

Mario placed his hands on Ezio’s shoulders and looked at him gravely for a long moment. ‘Our fate is only partially in our own hands. There is only a certain amount of it that we can control. But never forget – *never* forget, nephew – that whatever happens to you or me this day, there is never a feather lost by a sparrow that is not brushed away by the finger of God.’

‘I understand, *Capitano*.’

There was a brief moment of silence between them, then Mario extended his hand.

‘*Insieme per la vittoria!*’

Ezio took his uncle’s hand in his and wrung it fervently. ‘*Insieme!*’

As Mario turned to go, Ezio said, ‘*Capitano*, be careful.’

Mario nodded grimly. ‘I’ll do my best. And you – take my best horse and get to the outer walls as fast as you can.’ He drew his sword and, with a great war cry to rally his men, ran towards the foe.

Ezio watched him briefly, then ran towards the stable, where the old groom whose runaway horse he’d saved the day before was waiting. The huge chestnut was saddled and ready.

‘*Maestro* Mario had already sent orders,’ the old man said. ‘I may be past my prime, but no one could ever accuse me of being inefficient. *Ma attenzione*, this horse is full of spirit!’

‘I brought him to heel yesterday. He’ll know me today.’

‘True enough. *Buona fortuna*. We all depend on you.’

Ezio swung himself into the saddle and urged the eager horse towards the outer walls.

He rode through the already devastated town. The tailor was dead and mutilated in front of his shop – what harm had he ever done anyone? – And

Angelina was weeping in front of her burned-down house; what was the point of not showing her pity?

War – that was all. Brutalizing and cruel. Vicious and infantile. Ezio's gorge rose at it.

Freedom, mercy and love – these were the only things worth fighting and killing for – and these were the prime elements of the Assassin's Creed. Of the Brotherhood.

As Ezio rode forth, he encountered scenes of terrible desolation. Devastation and chaos surrounded him as his horse carried him through the burning town.

'My children! Where are my children?!' a young mother screamed as he passed by, helplessly.

'Just pack what you can and let's get out of here.' A man's voice rang out.

'Shit, my leg! My leg's been shot away!' yelled a townsman.

'How can we escape?' shrieked several people, rushing around in panic.

'I can't find my mother! Mamma! Mamma!' rang out the voice of a little child.

Ezio had to steel his heart. He could not go to the rescue of individuals – there was no time – but if he could organize the defence properly, more people would be saved than lost.

'*Aiuto! Aiuto!*' a teenaged girl, mobbed by Borgia troops, cried out as they forced her down.

Ezio rode grimly on. He would kill them. Kill them all, if he could. Who was this heartless Cesare Borgia? Could he be worse than the Pope? Could there ever be a more evil Templar?

'Water! Water! Bring water!' a man's voice bellowed despairingly. 'Everything is burning!'

'Where are you, please, oh God? Where are you, Marcello?' a woman's voice sang out.

Ezio rode on, his mouth set, but the cries for help still rang in his ears: '*Comè usciamo di qui*?'

'Run! Run!' Voices were raised against the sound of the bombardment. There were screams and sobs, desperate pleas for help, for a means of getting out of the beleaguered town as the pitiless Borgia troops piled cannonade upon cannonade.

Please God they do not breach the walls before our own guns have been brought into play, Ezio thought, and though he could hear the explosions as the sakers and falconets spat shot at the attackers, he could not yet hear the boom of the big guns he had encountered the day before, the only cannon that might be able to smash the huge wooden siege towers the Borgia forces were trundling towards the city walls.

He goaded the chestnut up the ramp to the walls and leapt off as he reached the point where he had last seen the drunken master armourer beside the ten-foot cannon. He was perfectly sober now and directing gunners to bring the gun to bear on a tower which their highly trained attackers were pushing slowly but surely towards the ramparts. Ezio could see that its top matched the height of the crenellations at the top of the walls.

'The wretches,' he muttered. But how could anyone have predicted the speed and – even Ezio had to admit this to himself – masterly perfection of the attack?

'Fire!' yelled the grizzled master sergeant who was in command of the first big gun. The great cannon boomed and sprang back, but the ball was just wide and only nicked a splattering of wood off a corner of the siege tower's roof.

'Try to hit the fucking towers, you fools!' yelled the sergeant.

'Sir, we need more ammunition!'

'Then go down to the stores and make it snappy! Look! They're storming the gate!'

Meanwhile the other cannon bellowed and spat. Ezio was pleased to see a tranche of attackers smashed into a sea of blood and bone.

'Reload!' yelled the sergeant. 'Fire again at my command!'

'Wait until the tower's closer,' ordered Ezio, 'then aim for the bottom. That'll bring the whole thing down. Our crossbowmen can finish off any survivors.'

'Yes, sir.'

The armourer came up. 'You learn tactics fast,' he said to Ezio.

'Instinct.'

'Good instinct's worth a hundred men in the field,' returned the armourer. 'But you missed target practice this morning. No excuse for that.'

'And what about you?' said Ezio.

'Come on,' grinned the armourer, 'we've got another of these cannon covering the left flank, and the commander of its gun crew is dead: crossbow bolt bang in his forehead. Dead before he hit the ground. You take over. I've got my work cut out for me making sure none of the guns overheats or cracks.'

'All right.'

'But watch how you aim. Your girlfriend's troops are out there fighting the Borgia. We wouldn't want to take any of them out.'

'What girlfriend?'

The armourer winked. 'Do me a favour, Ezio. This is a very small town.'

Ezio made his way to the second big gun. A gunner was sponging it down to cool it after firing as another was muzzle-loading it with tamped-down powder and a 50-pound iron ball. A third man prepared the slow match, lighting it at

both ends so there would be no delay if one end accidentally burnt out at the moment of touch.

'Let's go,' said Ezio as he came up.

'*Signore!*'

He scanned the field beyond the wall. The green grass was splattered with blood, and the fallen lay strewn among the wheatsheaves. He could see the yellow, black and blue livery of Caterina's men interspersed with the mulberry and yellow of the Borgia tunics.

'Get some of the smaller guns to pick out those individuals. Tell them to aim for the black and gold,' Ezio snapped. 'And let's get this gun trained on the siege tower over there. It's getting too close for comfort; we need to take it out.'

The gunners heaved the cannon round and dipped the barrel so that it was aimed at the base of the approaching tower, which was no more than fifty yards from the walls by now.

Ezio was busy directing aim when a nearby saker was hit. It exploded, flinging red-hot bronze in every direction. Ezio's gunner, who was inches away from him, had his head and shoulders sliced off by shards. The man's arms fell to the floor, and the remains of his body followed suit, spewing blood like a fountain. The pungent smell of burnt meat filled Ezio's nostrils as he leapt to take the gunner's place.

'Keep your nerve,' he yelled to the rest of the crew. He squinted along the gunsight. 'Steady now … and … *fire*!'

The cannon thundered as Ezio jumped to one side and watched as the ball smashed into the base of the tower. Had that one shot been enough? The tower lurched badly, seemed to steady, and then – by God! – crashed to the earth, seemingly in slow motion, throwing some of the men it contained clear whilst crushing others. The screams of the wounded mules that had been dragging it forward added to the cacophony of panic and death – the attendants of all battles. Ezio watched as Caterina's troops moved in swiftly to wipe out the wounded and bemused Borgia survivors. She herself was at the head, her silver breastplate flashing in the cold sunlight. Ezio saw her plunge her sword straight through a Borgia captain's right eye and into his brain. The soldier's body squirmed in the agony of death for a long moment, pivoted by its point, his hands uselessly trying to clutch the firmly held blade and pull it out.

There was no time to take pleasure in their triumph or rest on their laurels, though. Looking down over the ramparts, Ezio could see Borgia troops bringing massive battering rams up to the main gate, and at the same time he heard Caterina's warning cry. We'll send a thousand men to Forlì to help her against this bastard Cesare, he said to himself.

‘If they get in, they’ll kill us all,’ said a voice at his shoulder. Ezio turned to see the old master sergeant. He had lost his helmet and an ugly head wound seeped blood.

‘We must get the people out. Now.’

‘Some have already been able to leave, but those less able to help themselves are stranded.’

‘I’ll deal with it,’ said Ezio, recalling Mario’s admonition. ‘Take over here, Ruggiero. Look! Over there! They’ve got a tower right up to the ramparts! Their men are storming the wall! Get some more of our men over there before they overpower us.’

‘Sir!’ And the sergeant was gone, yelling orders, at the head of a platoon that gathered swiftly at his command and which, within seconds, was locked in hand-to-hand combat with the vicious Borgia mercenaries.

Ezio, sword in hand and slashing his way past the oncoming enemy troops, made his way down to the town. Quickly organizing a group of Caterina’s men who had been forced to retreat into the town as the tide of battle turned once more in the Borgia’s favour, he did his best to round up the remaining vulnerable townspeople and shepherd them into the relative safety of the citadel. As he completed the task, Caterina joined him.

‘What news?’ he asked her.

‘Bad news,’ she rejoined. ‘They’ve smashed down the main gate. They’re moving into the town.’

‘Then we haven’t a minute to lose. We must all retreat into the citadel.’

‘I’ll muster the rest of my men.’

‘Come quickly. Have you seen Mario?’

‘He was fighting outside the walls.’

‘And the others?’

‘Your mother and sister are already in the citadel. They’ve been guiding the citizens through the escape tunnel that leads to the north, beyond the walls, and safety.’

‘Good. I must go to them. Join us as fast as you can. We’ll have to fall back.’

‘Kill them all,’ yelled a Borgia sergeant as he rounded the corner at the head of a small troop of men. All held bloodied swords aloft, and one man brandished a pike on which he had stuck the head of a girl. Ezio’s throat went dry as he recognized the face – it was Angelina’s. With a roar, he fell on the Borgia soldiers. Six against one was nothing to him. Slicing and stabbing, within seconds he stood amidst a circle of maimed and dying men, his chest heaving as he breathed hard with the exertion

The blood cleared from his eyes. Caterina was gone. Wiping sweat, blood and grime from his face, he made his way back up to the citadel, telling the men guarding it to open up only to Mario and Caterina. He climbed the inner tower and looked down over the burning town.

Apart from the crackle of the flames and the isolated moans of the wounded and dying, things had gone ominously quiet.

9

The quiet did not last for long, however. Just as Ezio was checking that the cannon on the ramparts were correctly aligned and loaded, a mighty explosion threw the citadel's massive wooden gates aside, hurling its defenders backwards into the courtyard, below where Ezio stood on the battlements, and killing many.

As the smoke and dust cleared, Ezio made out a group of people standing in the gateway. His Uncle Mario appeared to be at their head, but evidently something was badly wrong. His face was grey and drained of blood. He also looked far older than his sixty-two years. His eyes locked with Ezio's as his nephew leapt down from the battlements to confront the new danger. Mario fell to his knees, then onto his face. He struggled to rise, but a long, thin, thrusting sword – a Bilbao – projected from between his shoulder blades. The young man behind him shoved him back into the gravel with the toe of his black boot and a trail of blood formed at the corner of the old man's mouth.

The young man was dressed in black, and a black mask partially covered his vicious face. Ezio recognized the pustules of the New Disease on the man's skin. He shuddered inwardly. There was no doubt whom he was confronting.

Flanking the man in black were two others, both in early middle age; and a beautiful blonde woman with cruel lips. Another man, also dressed in black, stood apart and a little to one side. He held a bloodstained falchion in his right hand, and in his left he held a chain, which was attached to a heavy collar around Caterina Sforza's neck, who was bound and gagged. Her eyes flashed unquenchable rage and defiance. Ezio's heart stopped – he couldn't believe that just this morning he'd held her once again, and now she'd been captured by the vile Borgia leader. How could this be happening? His eyes met hers for an instant across the courtyard, sending her a promise that she would not be a prisoner for long.

With no time to figure out all that was unfolding around him, Ezio's soldier's instinct took control. He must act now or lose everything. He strode forward, closed his eyes and stepped off the battlement, his cape flowing out behind him – it was a leap of faith to the courtyard below. With practised grace he landed on

his feet and stood tall to confront his enemies, cold determination etched on his face.

The master armourer staggered up, struggling with a wounded leg, and stood by Ezio. ‘Who are these people?’ he breathed.

‘Oh,’ said the young man in black, ‘we haven’t introduced ourselves. How remiss of us. But I course I know you, Ezio Auditore, if only by repute. Such a pleasure. At last I shall be able to remove the biggest thorn in my side. After your dear uncle, of course.’

‘Step back from him, Cesare!’

One eyebrow went up and the dark eyes blazed in the handsome, flawed face. ‘Oh, how flattered I am that you’ve guessed my name correctly. But let me present my sister, Lucrezia.’ He turned to nuzzle the blonde in a most unbrotherly way as she squeezed his arm and pressed her lips dangerously close to his mouth. ‘And my close associates Juan Borgia, cousin, friend and banker; my dear French ally, General Octavien de Valois, and, last but not least, my indispensable right-hand man, Micheletto da Corella. What would I do without my friends?’

‘And your father’s money.’

‘Bad joke, my friend.’

As Cesare spoke, his troops moved like ghosts into the citadel. Ezio was powerless to stop them as his own men – hopelessly outnumbered – were swiftly overcome and disarmed.

‘But I’m a good soldier, and part of the fun is choosing efficient support,’ Cesare continued. ‘I must admit I didn’t think you’d be quite such a pushover. But of course, you aren’t getting any younger, are you?’

‘I’ll kill you,’ Ezio said evenly. ‘I’ll wipe you and your kind from the face of the earth.’

‘Not today you won’t,’ said Cesare, smiling. ‘And just look what I’ve got, courtesy of your uncle.’ A gloved hand delved into a pouch at his side and from it he produced, to Ezio’s horror, the Apple!

‘Useful gadget,’ said Cesare, smiling thinly. ‘Leonardo da Vinci, my new military advisor, tells me he already knows quite a lot about it, so I’m hoping he’ll enlighten me further, which I’m sure he will if he wants to keep his head on his shoulders. Artists! Ten a penny, as I’m sure you’d agree.’

Lucrezia sniggered unfeelingly at this.

Ezio looked across at his old friend, but da Vinci refused to meet his gaze. On the floor, Mario stirred and groaned. Cesare pushed his face into the ground with his boot and produced a gun – it was a new design, as Ezio immediately

recognized, regretting again the destruction of most of his Codex weapons at the outset of the attack.

‘That’s not a matchlock,’ said the armourer keenly.

‘It’s a wheel-lock,’ said Cesare. ‘You’re clearly no fool,’ he added, addressing the armourer. ‘It’s much more predictable and efficient than the old guns. Leonardo designed it for me. Reloads fast, too. Would you like a demonstration?’

‘Indeed!’ the armourer replied, his professional interest overcoming any other instinct.

‘By all means,’ said Cesare, levelling the pistol at him and shooting him dead. ‘Reload, please,’ he continued, passing the gun to General Octavien and producing its twin from his belt. ‘We’ve had so much bloodshed,’ he went on, ‘so it’s distressing to reflect that a little more cleansing is in order. Never mind. Ezio, I’d like you to take this in the spirit it’s meant – from my family to yours.’

Stooping slightly and placing one foot in the centre of Mario’s back, he drew the sword out, letting the blood ooze forth. Mario’s eyes went wide with pain as he struggled to crawl towards his nephew.

Cesare leaned forward and fired the pistol at point-blank range into the back of Mario’s cranium, which burst apart.

‘No!’ shouted Ezio as the memory of the brutal murder of his father and brothers flashed through his mind. ‘No!’ He lunged towards Cesare, the agony of loss surging through him uncontrollably.

As Ezio leapt forward, General Octavien, having reloaded the gun. Ezio staggered back, choking, and the world went black.

10

By the time Ezio came to, the tide of battle had turned again and the Borgia attackers had been chased back outside the walls of the citadel. He found himself being dragged to safety as the soldiers who had retaken the *rocca* closed the broken gate with a barricade, gathered all the remaining citizens of Monteriggioni within its walls and began organizing their escape to the countryside beyond. There was no knowing how long they could hold out against the determined forces of the Borgia, whose strength seemed limitless.

All this Ezio learned from the grizzled master sergeant as he was recovering.

‘Stay still, my Lord.’

‘Where am I?’

‘On a stretcher. We’re taking you to the sanctuary. The inner sanctum. No one will reach there.’

‘Put me down. I can walk.’

‘We have to dress that wound.’

Ignoring him, Ezio shouted an order at the stretcher-bearers. But when he stood up his head reeled.

‘I cannot fight like this.’

‘Oh God, here they come again,’ bellowed the sergeant as a siege tower crashed into the upper castellations of the citadel, disgorging yet another fresh troop of Borgia soldiers.

Ezio turned to face them, his head slowly clearing from the darkness, his steely self-control overcoming the searing pain of the gunshot wound. Assassin *condottieri* quickly surrounded him and fought off Cesare’s men. They managed to beat a retreat with few casualties, but as they made their way into the inner vastness of the castle, Claudia shouted from a doorway, eager to hear of her brother’s well-being. As she stepped into the open, a Borgia captain rushed towards her, bloodied sword in his hand. Ezio looked on in horror, but recovered his composure enough to yell at his men. Two Assassin fighters ran towards Ezio’s sister, only just managing to put themselves between her and the flashing blade of the Borgia murderer. Sparks shot from the contact of the three blades as both Assassins raised their swords simultaneously to block the killing blow.

Claudia stumbled to the ground, her mouth open in a silent scream. The stronger of the Assassin soldiers, the master sergeant, pushed the enemy's sword skywards, locking the hilts at the hand-guards, while the other Assassin pulled back his blade and stabbed forward into the guts of the Borgia captain. Claudia regained her composure and rose slowly to her feet. Safely in the fold of the Assassin troop, she rushed towards Ezio, ripping a strip of cotton from her skirts and pressing it to his shoulder; the white cloth quickly bloomed red with blood from the wound.

'Shit! Don't take risks like that!' Ezio told her, thanking the sergeant as his men pushed the enemy back, hurling some from the high battlements while others fled.

'We must get you inside the sanctuary,' cried Claudia. 'Come on!'

Ezio allowed himself to be carried again – he had lost a lot of blood. In the meantime, the remaining citizens of the town, who had not yet been able to escape, crowded round them. Monteriggioni itself was deserted and under the complete control of the Borgia force. Only the citadel remained in Assassin hands.

Finally they reached their goal: the cavernous fortified room beneath the castle's northern wall, linked to the main building by a secret passage leading from Mario's library. But only in the nick of time. One of their men, a Venetian thief called Paganino who had once been under Antonio de Magianis's control, was in the act of closing the secret door to the stairwell as the last of the fugitives passed through it.

'We thought you had been killed, *Ser* Ezio!' he cried.

'They haven't got me yet,' returned Ezio grimly.

'I don't know what to do. Where does this passage lead?'

'To the north, outside the walls.'

'So it's true. We always thought it was a legend.'

'Well, now you know better,' said Ezio, looking at the man and wondering if, in the heat of the moment, he had said too much to a man he knew little of. He ordered his sergeant to close the door, but at the last moment Paganino slipped through it, back to the main building.

'Where are you going?'

'I have to help the defenders. Don't worry, I'll lead them back this way.'

'I must bolt this door behind us. If you don't come now you are on your own.'

'I'll manage, sir. I always do.'

'Then go with God. I must ensure the safety of these people.'

Ezio took stock of the crowd gathered in the sanctuary. In the gloom he could make out amongst the fugitives the features not only of Claudia, but of his

mother. He breathed an inward sigh of relief.

‘There is no time to be lost,’ he told them, jamming the door shut behind him with a sizeable iron bar.

11

Ezio's mother and sister quickly dressed and bandaged his wound properly, and got him to his feet, then Ezio directed the master sergeant to twist the hidden lever that had been built into the statue of the Master Assassin, Leonius, which stood by the side of the giant chimney piece at the centre of the northern wall of the sanctuary. The concealed door swung open, revealing the corridor through which the people could escape to the safety of the countryside half a mile beyond the city limits.

Claudia and Maria stood by the entrance, shepherding townsfolk through it. The master sergeant had gone ahead with a platoon, bearing torches, to guide and protect the refugees as they made their escape.

'*Hurry!*' Ezio urged the citizens as they entered the dark maw of the tunnel. 'Don't panic. Be quick but don't run. We don't want a stampede in the tunnel.'

'And what of us? What of Mario?' asked his mother.

'Mario – how can I tell you this? – Mario has been killed. I want you and Claudia to make your way home to Florence.'

'Mario dead?' cried Maria.

'What is there in Florence for us?' asked Claudia.

Ezio spread his hands. 'Our home. Lorenzo de' Medici and his son undertook to restore the Auditore mansion to us, and they were as good as their word. Now the city is in the control of the *Signoria* again, and I know that Governor Soderini watches over it well. Go home. Put yourselves in the care of Paola and Annetta. I will join you as soon as I can.'

'Are you sure? The news we've heard about our old house is very different. *Messer* Soderini was too late to save it. In any case, we want to stay with you. To help you.'

The last remaining townspeople were filing into the dark tunnel now, and as they did so, a great hammering and crashing of blows fell on the door that divided the sanctuary from the outside world.

'What is that?'

'It's the Borgia troops. Make haste! Make haste!'

He ushered his family into the tunnel, bringing up the rear with the few surviving Assassin troops.

It was a tough haul through the tunnel, and when they were halfway through Ezio heard a crash as the Borgia men broke through the door into the sanctuary. Soon, they would be in the tunnel themselves. He urged his charges forward, shouting at the stragglers to hurry and he heard the stamping of armed soldiers running down the tunnel behind them. As the group rushed past a gateway that ended one section of the passage, Ezio grabbed at a lever on the wall and, as the last of the Assassin fugitives rushed through, he yanked hard, releasing the portcullis gate. When it came crashing down, the first of their pursuers had caught up, only to be pinned to the floor by the heavy ironwork of the gate. His screams of agony filled the passage. Ezio had already run on, safe in the knowledge that he'd bought his people precious time to make good their escape.

After what seemed like hours, but can only have been minutes, the passage's incline seemed to change, levelling out and rising slightly. The air seemed less stale now that they were nearly out. Just at that moment they heard a heavy rumbling of sustained cannon fire – the Borgia must have unleashed their firepower on the citadel, a final act of desecration. The passage shook and eddies of dust fell from the ceiling; the sound of cracking stones could be heard, quiet at first but getting ominously louder.

'*Dio, ti prego, salvaci* – the roof is coming down!' sobbed one of the townswomen. The others began to scream as the fear of being buried alive flooded through the crowd.

Suddenly, the roof of the tunnel seemed to open up and a torrent of rubble cascaded down. The fugitives rushed forward, trying to escape from the falling rock, but Claudia reacted too slowly, disappearing in a cloud of dust. Ezio wheeled round in alarm, hearing his sister scream, but unable to see her. 'Claudia!' he shouted, panic in his voice.

'Ezio!' came the reply, and as the dust cleared Claudia picked her way carefully across the debris.

'Thank God you're all right. Did anything fall on you?' he asked. 'No, I'm fine. Is mother all right?'

'I'm fine,' answered Maria.

They dusted themselves down, thanking the gods they had survived this far, and made their way along the final stretch of the escape passage. At last they broke out into the open air. Never had grass, and the earth itself, smelled sweeter.

The mouth of the tunnel was separated from the countryside by a series of rope bridges swung across ravines. It had been designed like this by Mario as

part of a master escape plan. Monteriggioni would survive the Borgia desecration. Once the Borgia had razed it, it would be of no further interest to them, but Ezio would return in time and rebuild it once more as the proud stronghold of the Assassins. Of that Ezio was certain. It would be more than that, he promised himself; it would be a monument to his noble uncle, who had been so pitilessly slain.

He had had enough of the depredations wrought on his family by pointless villainy.

Ezio planned to cut the bridges down behind them as they fled, but their progress was slow as they were shepherding elderly and wounded stragglers. At his back he heard the yells and footsteps of their pursuers approaching rapidly. He was scarcely able to carry anyone on his back, but he managed to haul a woman whose leg had given out onto his good shoulder, and staggered forward across the first rope bridge, which swung dangerously under his weight.

'Come on!' he yelled, encouraging the rearguard who were already engaging with the Borgia soldiers. He waited on the far side until the last of his men had reached safety, but a couple of Borgia had also made it across. Ezio stepped into their path and, using his good arm to wield his sword, engaged the enemy. Even hampered by his wound, Ezio was more than a match for his opponents; his sword parried their attacks in a blur of steel, taking on both blades at once. Stepping to one side, he crouched low under a wild swing from one man, while using his weapon to slice at the knee joint of the man's leg armour. The soldier toppled, his left leg useless. The other attacker lunged down, thinking Ezio off balance, but Ezio had rolled aside as the blade clanged off the rocks, sending shards of stone skittering into the ravine. The man winced as the blow vibrated along his sword, jarring the bones of his hand and arm. Ezio saw his chance and, heaving himself upright, raised his sword above his foe's lowered arm and across his face. The man went down, and in a single fluid movement Ezio brought his blade to bear on the ropes supporting the bridge. They severed instantly, slashing violently backwards across the ravine. The bridge concertinaed away from the rocks, and the Borgia men who had begun to cross fell screaming into the abyss below.

Looking back across the ravine, Ezio saw Cesare. Next to him was Caterina, still in chains, which were held by a vicious-looking Lucrezia. Juan Borgia, the deathly pale Micheletto and the sweaty Frenchman, General Octavien, stood beside him.

Cesare was waving something at Ezio.

'Yours next!' he screamed in fury.

Ezio could see that it was his uncle's head.

12

There was only one place for Ezio to go now. The way forward for Cesare's troops was cut off and it would take them days to work their way around the ravine and catch up with the Assassin survivors. He directed the refugees to towns outside Borgia control, at least for the moment – Siena, San Gimignano, Pisa, Lucca, Pistoia and Florence – where they would find sanctuary. He also tried to impress upon his mother and sister the wisdom of returning to the safety of Florence, whatever had happened to Villa Auditore and despite the sad memories the city held, and the fact that both were seized with a compulsive desire to avenge Mario's death.

Ezio himself was bound for Rome, where, he knew, Cesare would go to regroup. It might even be that Cesare in his arrogance would think Ezio beaten, or dead on the road, like carrion. If so, then that could only be to the Assassin's advantage. Something else was haunting Ezio, though. With Mario dead, the Brotherhood was leaderless. Machiavelli was a powerful force within it, and at present he did not seem to be Ezio's friend. This was something that had to be resolved.

Along with the human survivors of the town was a number of livestock, including the great chestnut warhorse Mario had loved so much. Ezio mounted the steed, held for him by the old stable master, who had also managed to escape, though most of his horses had been captured by the Borgia.

Reining his horse in, he took leave of his mother and sister.

'Must you really go to Rome?' asked Maria.

'Mother, the only way to win this war is to take it to the enemy.'

'But how can you possibly succeed against the forces of the Borgia?'

'I am not their only enemy. And besides, Machiavelli is already there. I must make my peace with him so that we can work together.'

'Cesare has the Apple,' Claudia said soberly.

'We must pray that he does not master its powers,' Ezio replied, though privately he felt great misgivings. Leonardo was in Cesare's pay now, and Ezio was well aware of of his former friend's intelligence. If Leonardo taught Cesare the mysteries of the Apple – worse still, if Rodrigo got hold of it again …

He shook his head to rid himself of these thoughts. Time enough to confront the threat of the Apple when it presented itself.

‘You shouldn’t be riding now. Rome is miles to the south. Can’t you at least give it a day or two?’ asked Claudia.

‘The Borgia will not rest and the evil spirit of the Templars rides within them,’ rejoined Ezio drily. ‘No one will be able to sleep easily until their power is broken.’

‘What if it never is?’

‘We must never give up the fight. The minute we do that, we have lost.’

‘*È vero*.’ His sister’s shoulders slumped, but then she straightened them again. ‘The fight must *never* be given up,’ she said firmly.

‘Until death,’ said Ezio.

‘Until death.’

‘Take care on the road.’

‘Take care on the road.’

Ezio leaned down from the saddle to kiss his mother and sister before wheeling the horse round and onto the road south. His head was pounding with the pain of his wound and the exertions of battle. More than this was the aching of his heart and soul at the loss of Mario and the capture of Caterina. He shuddered at the thought of her in the clutches of the evil Borgia family; he knew all too well what fate might befall her in their hands. He would have to skirt around the Borgia troops, but his heart told him that now his main objective had been achieved – to break the Assassin stronghold – Cesare would head home. There was also the question of Caterina’s safety, though Ezio knew that if ever a person would go down fighting, it was she.

The most important thing was to lance the boil that was infecting Italy, and lance it soon, before it could infect the whole land.

Ezio dug his heels hard into the horse’s flanks and galloped south down the dusty road.

His head was swimming with exhaustion, but he willed himself to keep awake. He vowed he would not rest until he arrived in the broken-down capital of his beleaguered country. He had miles to go before he would be able to sleep.

13

How stupid had he been to ride for so long wounded, and so far south, only breaking the ride for the horse's sake. A post horse would have been more sensible, but the chestnut steed, Agnella, was his last link to Mario.

Where was he? He remembered a crumbling, dingy suburb and then, rising out of it, a once-majestic yellow stone arch, an erstwhile gateway that pierced a formerly magnificent city's walls.

Ezio's impulse had been to rejoin Machiavelli – to right the wrong he had committed by not making sure that Rodrigo Borgia was dead.

But by God, he was tired.

He lay back on the pallet he found himself on. He could smell the dry straw, its odour carrying with it a hint of cow dung.

Where was he?

An image of Caterina came suddenly and strongly into his mind. He must free her. They had to be together at last.

But perhaps he should also free himself *from* her, though part of his heart told him that this was not what he really wanted. How could he trust her? How could a simple man ever understand the subtle labyrinths of a woman's mind? Alas, the torture of love didn't seem to get any less acute with age.

Was she using him?

Ezio had always maintained an inner room within his heart, a *sanctum sanctorum* that was kept locked, even to his most intimate friends, his mother – who knew of it and respected it – his sister, and his late brothers and father.

Had Caterina broken in? He hadn't been able to prevent the killing of his father and brothers, and by Christ and the Cross he had done his best to protect Maria and Claudia.

Caterina could look after herself – she was a book that kept its covers closed – and yet … and yet, how he longed to read it.

'I love you,' his heart cried out to Caterina in spite of himself. The woman of his dreams at last, this late in life. But his duty, he told himself, came first, and Caterina … Caterina never truly showed her cards. Her enigmatic brown eyes, her smile, the way she could twist him round her long, expert fingers. The

closeness. The closeness. But also the keen silence of her hair, which always smelled of vanilla and roses …

How could he ever trust her, even when he laid his head on her breast after they had made passionate love, and wanted so much to feel secure?

No! The Brotherhood. The Brotherhood. The Brotherhood! His mission and his destiny.

I am dead, Ezio said to himself. I am already dead inside, but I will finish what I have to do.

The dream dissolved and his eyelids flickered open, revealing a view of an ample but elderly cleavage descending on him, the chemise the woman was wearing parting like the Red Sea.

Ezio sat up rapidly. His wound was properly dressed now, and the pain was so dull as to be almost negligible. As his eyes focused, they took in a small room with walls of rough-hewn stone. Calico curtains were drawn across the small windows, and in a corner an iron stove burned, the embers from its open door giving the place its only light. The door was shut, but whoever was with him in the room lit the stump of a candle.

A middle-aged woman, who looked like a peasant, knelt beside him, just within the frame of his vision. Her face was kindly as she tended to his wound, rearranging the poultice and bandage.

It was sore! Ezio winced in pain.

'*Calmatevi*,' said the woman. 'The pain will end soon.'

'Where's my horse? Where's Campione?'

'Safe. Resting. God knows she deserves it. She was bleeding from the mouth. A good horse like that. What were you doing to her?'

The woman put down the bowl of water she was holding and stood.

'Where am I?'

'In Rome, my dear. *Messer* Machiavelli found you fainting in your saddle, your horse frothing, and brought you both here. Don't worry, he's paid me and my husband well to look after you both. And a few more coins for our discretion. But you know *Messer* Machiavelli – cross him at your peril. Anyway, we've done this kind of job for your organization before.'

'Did he leave me any message?'

'Oh yes. You're to meet him as soon as you're fit at the Mausoleum of Augustus. Know where that is?'

'It's one of the ruins, isn't it?'

'Dead right. Not that it's much less of a ruin than most of this awful city nowadays. To think it was once the centre of the world. Look at it now – smaller

than Florence; half the size of Venice. But we do have one boast.' She cackled.

'And that is?'

'Only fifty thousand poor souls live in this shanty town of a city that once was proud to call itself Rome; and seven thousand of them are prostitutes. That's got to be a record.' She cackled some more. 'No wonder everyone's riddled with the New Disease. Don't sleep with anyone here', she added, 'if you don't want to fall apart with the pox. Even cardinals have it – and they say the Pope himself, and his son, are sufferers.'

Ezio remembered Rome as if in a dream. A bizarre place now, whose ancient, rotting walls had been designed to encompass a population of one million. Now most of the area was given over to peasant farming.

He remembered too the ruined wasteland of what had once been the Great Forum in ancient times, but where sheep and goats now grazed. People stole the ancient carved marble and porphyry stones, which lay higgledy-piggledy in the grass, to build pigsties or to grind down for lime. And out of the desolation of slums and crooked, filthy streets, the great new buildings of Popes Sixtus IV and Alexander VI rose obscenely, like wedding cakes on a table where there was nothing else to eat but stale bread.

The aggrandisement of the Church was confirmed, back at last from the Papal exile at Avignon. The Pope – the leading figure in the international world, outclassing not only kings but the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian himself – had his seat in Rome once more.

Hadn't it been Pope Alexander VI who'd divided, in his great judgment, the southern continent of the New Americas between the colonizing countries of Portugal and Spain in the Treaty of Tordesillas in 1494? It was the same year the New Disease broke out in Naples in Italy. They called it the French Disease – *morbus gallicus* – but everyone knew it had come back from the New World with Columbus's Genoese sailors. It was an unpleasant affliction. People's faces and bodies bubbled up in pustules and boils, and their faces were often pressed out of all recognizable shape in the last stages.

Here in Rome, the poor made do on barley and bacon – when they could get bacon – and the dirty streets harboured typhus, cholera and the Black Death. As for the citizens, on the one hand there were the ostentatiously rich, whilst the majority looked like cowherds and lived just as badly.

What a contrast to the gilded opulence of the Vatican. The great city of Rome had become a rubbish heap of history. Along the filthy alleys that passed for streets, in which feral dogs and wolves now roamed, Ezio remembered churches

which today were falling apart, rotting deserted palaces that reminded him of the probable wreck of his own family seat in Florence.

'I must get up. I must find *Messer* Machiavelli,' said Ezio, urgently flinging the visions from his mind.

'All in good time,' replied his nurse. 'He left you a new suit of clothes. Put them on when you are ready.'

Ezio stood, but as he did so his head swam. He shook himself to clear it, then donned the suit Machiavelli had left him. It was new and made of linen, with a hood of soft wool that had a peak like an eagle's beak. There were strong, soft gloves and boots of Spanish leather. He dressed himself, fighting the pain the effort caused him, and when he was done, the woman guided him to a balcony. Ezio realized then that he had not been in some shrunken hovel, but in the remains of what had once been a great palace. They must have been on the *piano nobile*. He drew in his breath as he looked at the desolate wreck of the city spread out below him. A rat scuttled boldly over his feet. He kicked it away.

'Ah, *Roma*,' he said ironically.

'What's left of it,' the woman repeated, cackling again.

'Thank you, *Madonna*. To whom do I owe … ?'

'I am the *Contessa* Margherita deghli Campi,' she said, and in the dim light Ezio could see at last the fine lines of a once beautiful face. 'Or what's left of her.'

'*Contessa*,' Ezio said, trying to keep the sadness out of his voice as he bowed.

'The *Mausoleo* is over there,' she replied, smiling and pointing. 'That is where you are to meet.'

'I can't see it.'

'In that direction. Unfortunately, you cannot see it from my *palazzo*.'

Ezio squinted into the dark. 'What about from the tower of that church?'

She looked at him. 'Santo Stefano's? Yes. But it's a ruin. The stairs to the tower have collapsed.'

Ezio braced himself. He needed to get to his meeting place as safely and as quickly as possible. He did not want to be delayed by the beggars, tarts and muggers who infested the streets by day and night.

'That shouldn't be a problem,' he told the woman. '*Vi ringrazio di tutto quello che avete fatto per me, buona Contessa. Addio*.'

'You are more than welcome,' she replied with a wry smile. 'But are you sure you're fit enough to go so soon? I think you should see a doctor. I'd recommend one, but I can't afford them any more. I have cleaned and dressed your wound, but I am no expert.'

‘The Templars won’t wait and nor can I,’ he replied. ‘Thank you again, and goodbye.’

‘Go with God.’

He leapt from the balcony down to the street, wincing at the impact, and darted across the square, which was dominated by the disintegrating palace, in the direction of the church. Twice he lost sight of the tower and had to double back. Three times he was accosted by leprous beggars and once confronted by a wolf, which slunk off down an alley with what may have been a dead child between its jaws. At last he was in the open space before the church. It was boarded up, and the limestone saints that adorned its portal were deformed by neglect. He didn’t know whether he could trust the rotten stonework, but there was nothing for it; he had to climb.

He managed it, though he lost his footing on several occasions and once his feet fell free over an embrasure that collapsed beneath them, leaving him hanging by the tips of his fingers. He was still a strong man, despite his injuries, and he managed to haul himself up and out of danger until at last he was on top of the tower that was perched on its lead roof. The dome of the Mausoleum glinted dully in the moonlight several blocks away. He’d go there now and wait for Machiavelli to arrive.

He adjusted his Hidden Blade, sword and dagger, and was about to make a leap of faith down to a haywain parked in the square below when his wound caused him to double up in pain.

‘The *Contessa* dressed my shoulder well, but she was right, I must see a doctor,’ he said to himself.

Painfully, he clambered down the tower to the street. He had no idea where to find a *medico*, so he made his way to an inn, where he obtained directions in exchange for a couple of ducats, which also bought him a beaker of filthy Sanguineus, which assuaged his pain somewhat.

It was late by the time he reached the doctor’s surgery. He had to knock several times, and hard, before there was a muffled response from within, then the door opened a crack to reveal a fat, bearded man of about sixty, wearing thick eyeglasses. He looked the worse for wear – Ezio could smell drink on his breath – and one of his eyes seemed larger than the other.

‘What do you want?’ said the man.

‘Are you *Dottore* Antonio?’

‘And if I am … ?’

‘I need your help.’

‘It’s late,’ said the doctor, but his gaze had wandered to the wound on Ezio’s shoulder, and his eyes became cautiously more sympathetic. ‘It’ll cost extra.’

‘I am not in a position to argue.’

‘Good. Come in.’

The doctor unchained his door and stood aside. Ezio staggered gratefully into a hallway whose beams were hung with a collection of copper pots and glass phials, dried bats and lizards, mice and snakes.

The doctor ushered him through to an inner room containing a huge desk, untidily covered with papers, a narrow bed in one corner, a cupboard whose open doors revealed more phials, and a leather case, also open, containing a selection of scalpels and miniature saws.

The doctor followed Ezio’s eyes and barked out a short laugh. ‘We *medici* are just jumped-up mechanics,’ he said. ‘Lie down on the bed and I’ll have a look. Before you do, it’s three ducats – in advance.’

Ezio handed over the money.

The doctor undressed the wound and pushed and shoved until Ezio virtually passed out with the pain.

‘Hold still!’ the doctor grumbled. He poked around some more, poured some stinging liquid from a flask over the wound, dabbed at it with a cotton wad, produced some clean bandages and bound it firmly once more.

‘Someone your age cannot recover from a wound like this with medicine.’ The doctor rummaged about in his cupboard and produced a phial of treacly-looking stuff. ‘But here’s something to dull the pain. Don’t drink it all at once. It’s another three ducats, by the way. And don’t worry, you’ll heal over time.’

‘*Grazie, dottore*.’

‘Four out of five doctors would have suggested leeches, but they haven’t proven effective against this sort of wound. What is it? If they weren’t so rare, I’d say it was from a gunshot. Come back if you need to. Or I can recommend several good colleagues around the city.’

‘Do they cost as much as you do?’

Doctor Antonio sneered. ‘My good sir, you’ve got off lightly.’

Ezio stomped out into the street. A light rain had begun to fall and the streets were already turning muddy.

‘ “Someone your age,” ’ grumbled Ezio. ‘*Che sobbalzo!*’

He made his way back to the inn as he’d noticed they had rooms for rent. He’d stay there, eat something, and make his way to the Mausoleum in the morning. Then he’d just have to wait for his fellow Assassin to show up. Machiavelli might at least have left some kind of rendezvous time with the *Contessa*. Ezio was aware of Machiavelli’s passion for security, though. He’d no doubt turn up at the appointed spot every day at regular intervals. Ezio shouldn’t have too long to wait.

Ezio picked his way through the wretched streets and alleys, darting back into the darkness of doorways whenever a Borgia patrol – easily recognized by their mulberry and yellow livery – passed by.

It was midnight by the time he reached the inn again. He took a swig from the phial of dark liquid – it was good – and hammered on the inn door with the pommel of his sword.

14

The following day Ezio left the inn early. His wound felt stiff, but the pain was duller and he was better able to use his arm now. Before leaving he practised a few strokes with the Hidden Blade and found he could use it without difficulty, as well as more conventional sword-and-dagger work. It was just as well he hadn't been shot in the shoulder of his sword-arm.

Not being sure whether the Borgia and their Templar associates knew that he had escaped the battle of Monteriggioni with his life, and noting the high number of soldiers armed with guns and dressed in the dark mulberry red and yellow livery of the Borgia, he took a roundabout route to the Mausoleum of Augustus, and the sun was high by the time he reached it.

There were fewer people about, and after having scouted round, assuring himself that no guards were watching the place, Ezio cautiously approached the building, slipping through a ruined doorway into the gloomy interior.

As his eyes accustomed themselves to the darkness, he made out a figure dressed in black, leaning against a stone outcrop and still as a statue. He glanced to each side to ascertain that there was somewhere to duck behind before it noticed him, but apart from tussocks of grass among the fallen stones of the ancient Roman ruin, there was nothing. He decided on the next best thing and swiftly but silently started to move towards the deeper darkness of the Mausoleum's walls.

He was too late. Whoever it was had seen him, probably as soon as he'd entered, framed by the light from the doorway, and moved towards him. As it approached, he recognized the black-suited figure of Machiavelli, who placed a finger on his lips as he came closer. Beckoning him discreetly to follow, Machiavelli made his way into a deeper, darker area of the ancient Roman Emperor's tomb, built almost one and half millennia earlier.

At last he stopped and turned.

'Shh,' he said and, waiting, listened keenly.

'Wha—?'

'Voice down. Voice very low,' admonished Machiavelli, listening still.

At last he relaxed. 'All right,' he continued. 'There's no one.'

‘What do you mean?’

‘Cesare Borgia has eyes everywhere.’ Machiavelli relaxed a little. ‘I am glad to see you here.’

‘But you left me clothes at the *Contessa*’s …’

‘She had word to watch for your arrival in Rome.’ Machiavelli grinned. ‘Oh, I knew you’d come here. Once you’d assured yourself of the safety of your mother and sister. After all, they are the last of the Auditore family.’

‘I don’t like your tone,’ said Ezio, bridling slightly.

Machiavelli allowed himself a thin smile. ‘This is no time for tact, my dear colleague. I know the guilt you feel about your lost family, even though you are not remotely to blame for that great betrayal.’ He paused. ‘News of the attack on Monteriggioni has spread across this city. Some of us were sure that you had died there. I left the clothes with our trusted friend because I knew you better than that you would go and die on us at such a crucial time – or at any rate, just in case.’

‘You still have faith in me then?’

Machiavelli shrugged. ‘You blundered. Once. Because fundamentally your instinct is to show mercy and trust. Those are good instincts. But now we must strike, and strike hard. Let’s hope the Templars never know that you are still alive.’

‘But they must already know.’

‘Not necessarily. My spies tell me there was a lot of confusion.’

Ezio paused for thought. ‘Our enemies will know soon enough that I am alive – and very much so. How many do we fight?’

‘Oh, Ezio, the good news is that we have narrowed the field. We have wiped out many Templars across Italy and across many of the lands beyond its boundaries. The bad news is that the Templars and the Borgia family are now one and the same thing, and they will fight like a cornered lion.’

‘Tell me more.’

‘We are too isolated here. We need to lose ourselves in the crowds in the centre of town. We will go to the bullfight.’

‘The bullfight?’

‘Cesare excels as a bullfighter. After all, he is a Spaniard. In fact he’s not a Spaniard, but a Catalan, and that may one day prove to be to our advantage.’

‘How?’

‘The king and queen of Spain want to unify their country. They are from Aragon and Castile. The Catalans are a thorn in their side, though they are still a powerful nation. Come, and be cautious. We must both use the skills of blending

in that Paola taught you so long ago in Venice. I hope you have not forgotten them.'

'Try me.'

They walked together through the half-ruined, once-imperial city, keeping to the shadows and slipping in and out of the crowds as fish hide in the rushes. At last they reached the bullring, where they took seats on the more expensive, crowded, shady side, and watched for an hour as Cesare and his many backup men despatched three fearsome bulls. Ezio watched Cesare's fighting technique: he used the banderilleros and the picadors to break the animal down before delivering the *coup de grâce* after a good deal of showing off. But there was no doubting his courage and prowess during the grim ritual of death, despite the fact that he had four junior matadors to support him. Ezio looked over his shoulder at the box of the *Presidente* of the fight: there he recognized the harsh but compellingly beautiful face of Cesare's sister, Lucrezia. Was it his imagination or had he seen her bite her lip until it bled?

At any rate, he had learned something of how Cesare would behave in the field of battle – and how far he could be trusted in any kind of combat.

Everywhere, Borgia guards watched the throng, just as they did in the streets, all of them armed with those lethal-looking new guns.

'Leonardo …' he said involuntarily, thinking of his old friend.

Machiavelli looked at him. 'Leonardo was forced to work for Cesare on pain of death – and a most painful death it would have been. It's a detail – a terrible detail, but a detail nonetheless. The point is, his heart is not with his new master, who will never have the intelligence or the facility to control the Apple fully. Or at least I hope it isn't. We must be patient. We will get it back, and we will get Leonardo back with it.'

'I wish I could be so sure.'

Machiavelli sighed. 'Perhaps you are wise to be doubtful,' he said at last.

'Spain has taken over Italy,' said Ezio.

'Valencia has taken over the Vatican,' Machiavelli replied, 'but we can change that. We have allies in the College of Cardinals, some of whom are powerful. They aren't all lapdogs. And Cesare, for all his vaunting, depends on his father Rodrigo for funds.' He gave Ezio a keen look. 'That is why you should have made sure of this interloping Pope.'

'I didn't know.'

'I'm as much to blame as you are. I should have told you. But as you said yourself, it's the present we have to deal with, not the past.'

'Amen to that.'

'Amen.'

‘But how do they afford all this?’ Ezio asked as another bull foundered and fell under Cesare’s unerring and pitiless sword.

‘*Papa* Alexander is a strange mixture,’ Machiavelli replied. ‘He’s a great administrator and has even done the Church some good, but the evil part of him always defeats the good. He was the Vatican’s treasurer for years and found ways of amassing money – the experience has stood him in good stead. He sells cardinal’s hats, creating dozens of cardinals virtually guaranteed to be on his side. He has even pardoned murderers, provided they have enough money to buy their way off the gallows.’

‘How does he justify that?’

‘Very simple. He preaches that it is better for a sinner to live and repent than to die and forego such pain.’

Ezio couldn’t help laughing, though his laugh was mirthless. His mind returned to the recent celebrations to mark the year 1500 – the Great Year of the Half-Millennium. True, there had been flagellants roaming the country in expectation of the Last Judgement, and hadn’t the mad monk Savonarola – who’d briefly had control of the Apple, and whom he himself had defeated in Florence – not been duped by that superstition?

1500 had been a great jubilee year. Ezio remembered that thousands of hopeful pilgrims had made their way to the Holy See from all parts of the world. The year had even been celebrated in those small outposts across the far seas to the west, in the New Lands discovered by Colombus and, a few years later, by Amerigo Vespucci, who had confirmed their existence. Money had flowed into Rome as the faithful bought indulgences to redeem themselves from their sins in anticipation of Christ returning to earth to judge the quick and the dead. It had also been the time when Cesare had set out to subjugate the city states of the Romagna, and when the king of France had taken Milan, justifying his actions by claiming to be the rightful heir – the great-grandson of Gian Galeazzo Visconti.

The Pope had then made his son, Cesare, Captain-General of the Papal Forces, and *Gonfaloniere* of the Holy Roman Church in a great ceremony on the morning of the fourth Sunday of Lent. Cesare was welcomed by boys in silk gowns and four thousand soldiers wearing his personal livery. His triumph had seemed complete: the previous year, in May, he’d married Charlotte d’Albret, sister of John, King of Navarre; and King Louis of France, with whom the Borgia were allied, gave him the dukedom of Valence. Having already been Cardinal of Valencia, no wonder the people gave him the nickname Valentino.

Now this viper was at the peak of his power.

How could Ezio ever defeat him?

He shared these thoughts with Machiavelli.

‘In the end, we will use their own vainglory to bring them down,’ said Niccolò. ‘They have an Achilles heel. Everyone does. I know what yours is.’

‘And that is?’ snapped Ezio, needled.

‘I do not need to tell you her name. Beware of her,’ rejoined Machiavelli, but then, changing the subject, he continued, ‘Remember the orgies?’

‘They continue?’

‘Indeed they do. How Rodrigo – I refuse to call him Pope any more – loves them. And you’ve got to hand it to him, he’s seventy years old.’ Machiavelli laughed wryly, then suddenly became more serious. ‘The Borgia will drown under the weight of their own self-indulgence.’

Ezio remembered the orgies well. He had been witness to one. There’d been a dinner, given by the Pope in his Nero-like, over-decorated, gilded apartments and attended by fifty of the best of the city’s army of whores. Courtesans, they liked to call themselves, but whores for all that. When the eating – or should it be called feeding? – was over, the girls danced with the servants who were in attendance. They were clothed at first, but later they shed their garments. The candelabra that had been on the tables were set down on the marble floor, and the nobler guests threw roasted chestnuts among them. The whores were then told to crawl about the floor on all fours like cattle, buttocks high in the air, to collect the chestnuts. Then almost everyone had joined in. Ezio remembered with distaste how Rodrigo, together with Cesare and Lucrezia, had looked on. At the end, prizes were given – silk cloaks; fine leather boots, from Spain of course; mulberry-and-yellow velvet caps encrusted with diamonds; rings; bracelets; brocade pouches each containing 100 ducats; daggers; silver dildoes; anything you could imagine – to those men who had had sex the most number of times with the crawling prostitutes. And the Borgia family, fondling each other, had been the principal judges.

The two Assassins left the bullfight and made themselves invisible in the crowds that thronged the early-evening streets.

‘Follow me,’ Machiavelli said, an edge to his voice. ‘Now you have had a chance to see your principal opponent at work, it would be well to purchase any equipment you are missing. And take care not to draw any undue attention to yourself.’

‘Do I ever?’ Ezio found himself once more needled by the younger man’s remarks. Machiavelli wasn’t the Brotherhood’s leader – after Mario’s death, no one was – and this interregnum would have to be concluded soon. ‘In any case, I have my Hidden Blade.’

‘And the guards have their guns. These things Leonardo has created for them – you know his genius cannot control itself – are fast to reload, as you’ve seen, and moreover they have barrels filed in a cunning way on the inside to make the shot more accurate.’

‘I’ll find Leonardo and talk to him.’

‘You may have to kill him.’

‘He’s worth more to us alive than dead. You said yourself his heart wasn’t with the Borgia.’

‘I said that is what I hope.’ Machiavelli stopped. ‘Look. Here is money.’

‘*Grazie*,’ said Ezio, taking the proffered pouch.

‘While you are in my debt, listen to reason.’

‘As soon as I hear more reason from you, I shall.’

Ezio left his friend and made his way to the quarter of the armourers, where he provided himself with a new breastplate, steel cuffs, and a better-balanced, higher-quality sword and dagger than those he already possessed. Above all he missed the old Codex Bracer, made of a secret metal, which had staved off so many blows that otherwise would have been fatal. But it was too late to regret that now. He’d just have to rely on his wits and his training. No one, and no accident, could take them from him.

He returned to Machiavelli, who was waiting for him at an inn, their pre-appointed rendezvous.

He found him in a prickly mood.

‘*Bene*,’ said Machiavelli. ‘Now you can survive the journey back to *Firenze*.’

‘Perhaps. But I am not going back to Florence.’

‘No?’

‘Perhaps you should. It is where you belong. I have no home there any more.’

Machiavelli spread his hands. ‘It’s true that your old home has indeed been destroyed. I didn’t want to tell you. But surely your mother and sister are safe there now. It is a city safe from the Borgia. My master, Piero Soderini, guards it well. You can recoup there.’

Ezio shuddered at having his worst fears confirmed. Then he pulled himself together and said, ‘I stay here. You said yourself, there will be no peace until we rise up against the entire Borgia family and the Templars who serve them.’

‘Such brave talk! And after Monteriggioni.’

‘That is cheap of you, Niccolò. How could I have known that they would find me so quickly? Or that they would kill Mario?’

Machiavelli spoke earnestly, taking his companion by the shoulders. ‘Look, Ezio, whatever happens we must prepare ourselves carefully. We must not hit out in rash anger. We are fighting *scorpioni* – worse, serpents! They can coil

around your neck and bite your balls in one movement. They know nothing of right and wrong; they only know their goal. Rodrigo surrounds himself with snakes and murderers. Even his daughter Lucrezia has been sharpened into one of his most artful weapons: she knows all there is to know about the art of poisoning.' He paused. 'However, even she pales by comparison with Cesare.'

'Him again.'

'He is ambitious, ruthless and cruel beyond – thank God! – your imagination. The laws of men mean nothing to him. He has murdered his own brother, the Duke of Gandía, to claw his way towards absolute power. He will stop at nothing.'

'I'll pluck him down.'

'Only if you are not rash. He has the Apple, don't forget. Heaven help us if he really learns its powers.'

Ezio's mind flashed nervously to Leonardo, who understood the Apple all too well …

'He recognizes neither danger nor fatigue,' Machiavelli continued. 'Those who do not fall by his sword clamour to join his ranks. Already the powerful Orsini and Colonna families have been brought down and made to kneel at his feet, and King Louis of France stands by his side.' Machiavelli paused again, thoughtful. 'But at least King Louis will only remain his ally as long as he is useful to him …'

'You overestimate the man.'

Machiavelli appeared not to have heard him; he was lost in his own thoughts. 'What does he intend to do with all that power and money? What drives the man? That, I still do not know. But, Ezio,' he added, fixing his gaze on his friend, 'Cesare has set his sights on all *Italia*, and at this rate he will have it.'

Ezio hesitated, shocked. 'Is that … is that *admiration* I hear in your voice?'

Machiavelli's face was set. 'He knows how to exercise his will – a rare virtue in the world today – and he is the kind of man who could make the world bend to that will.'

'What do you mean, exactly?'

'Just this: people need someone to look up to – to adore even. It may be God, or Christ, but better yet, someone you can really see, not just an image. Rodrigo, Cesare, even a great actor or singer, as long as they're dressed well and have faith in themselves. The rest follows quite logically.' Machiavelli drank a little wine. 'It's part of us, you see. It doesn't interest you or me or Leonardo, but there are people out there who have a hunger to be followed, and they are the dangerous ones.' He finished his drink. 'Fortunately, they can also be manipulated by people like me.'

‘Or destroyed by people like me.’

They sat in silence for a long moment.

‘Who will lead the Assassins now that Mario is dead?’ asked Ezio.

‘What a question! We are in disorder and there are few candidates. It’s important, of course, and the choice will be made in time. In the meantime, come on. We have work to do.’

‘Shall we take horses? Half of it may be falling down, but Rome’s still a big city,’ suggested Ezio.

‘Easier said than done. As Cesare’s conquests in the Romagna increase – and he controls most of the region now – and the Borgia grow in power, they’ve taken the best areas of the city for themselves. We’re in a Borgia *rione* now. We won’t get horses from the stables here.’

‘So the will of the Borgia is the only law here now?’

‘Ezio, what are you implying? That I approve of it?’

‘Don’t play dumb with me, Niccolò.’

‘I don’t play dumb with anyone. Do you have a plan?’

‘We’ll improvise.’

They made their way towards the place where the local stables with horses for hire were located, walking down streets where, Ezio noticed, many of the shops that should have been open had their shutters down. What was the matter? Sure enough, the closer they got, the more numerous and menacing were the guards in mulberry-and-yellow livery. Machiavelli, Ezio noticed, was becoming increasingly nervous.

It wasn’t long before a burly sergeant, at the head of a dozen or so tough-looking thugs in uniform, blocked their path.

‘What’s your business here, friend?’ he said to Ezio.

‘Time to improvise?’ whispered Machiavelli.

‘We want to hire some horses,’ Ezio replied evenly to the sergeant.

The sergeant barked out a laugh. ‘Not here you won’t, friend. On your way.’ He pointed back in the direction they’d come.

‘Isn’t it allowed?’

‘No.’

‘Why not?’

The sergeant drew his sword as the other guards followed suit. He held the point of his blade against Ezio’s neck and pushed slightly, so that a drop of blood appeared. ‘You know what curiosity did to the cat, don’t you? Now, fuck off!’

With an almost imperceptible movement, Ezio swept out his Hidden Blade and with it severed the tendons of the wrist holding the sword, which clattered

uselessly to the ground. With a great cry the sergeant buckled over, grasping his wound. At the same time Machiavelli leapt forward and slashed at the nearest three guards with his sword in a great sweeping motion – they all staggered back, astonished at the sudden boldness of the two men.

Ezio swiftly withdrew the Hidden Blade, and in one fluid movement unsheathed his sword and dagger. His weapons were clear and poised just in time to cut down the first two of his attackers who, having recovered some of their composure, had stepped forward to avenge their sergeant. None of the Borgia men had the skill at arms required to take on either Ezio or Machiavelli – the Assassin's training was of a wholly different class. Even so, the odds were against the two allies, who were heavily outnumbered. However, the unexpected ferocity of their attack was enough to give them an unassailable edge.

Taken almost wholly by surprise, and unused to coming off worse in any encounter, the dozen men were soon dispatched. But the commotion of the scuffle had raised the alarm, and more Borgia soldiers were quick to come – over two dozen men all told. Machiavelli and Ezio were nearly overwhelmed by the sheer weight of numbers, and with the effort of taking on so many at once. The flourishes of style that they were capable of were set aside for a quicker, more efficient form of swordsmanship – the three-second kill, a single thrust sufficing. The two men stood their ground, grim determination set on their faces, and finally all their enemies had either fled, or lay wounded, dead or dying at their feet.

'We'd better hurry,' said Machiavelli, breathing hard. Just because we've sent a few Borgia henchmen to their Maker doesn't mean we'll get access to the stables. The ordinary people remain afraid. That's why so many of them won't even open their shops.'

'You're right,' agreed Ezio. 'We need to send them a signal. Wait here.'

A fire was burning in a brazier nearby. From it, Ezio seized a brand, then leapt up onto the wall of the stable, where the Borgia flag with the black bull in a golden field flew in the light breeze. Ezio set it on fire, and as it burned, one or two shop doors cautiously opened, as did the gates of the stables.

'That's better!' cried Ezio. He turned to address the small but doubtful crowd that had gathered. 'Do not fear the Borgia. Do not be in thrall to them. Their days are numbered, and the hour of reckoning is at hand.'

More people came up, raising a cheer.

'They'll be back,' Machivelli said.

'Yes they will, but we've shown these people that they are not the all-powerful tyrants they took them to be.'

Ezio leapt down from the wall into the stable yard, where Machiavelli joined him. Swiftly, they picked two sturdy mounts and had them saddled.

‘We’ll come back,’ Ezio promised the head ostler. ‘You might like to get this place cleaned up a bit – now that it belongs to you again, as it rightfully should.’

‘We will, my Lord,’ said the man. But he still looked fearful.

‘Don’t worry. They won’t harm you now that you’ve seen them bested.’

‘How do you figure that, my Lord?’

‘They need you. They can’t do without you. Just show them you won’t be bullied and pushed around and they’ll have to cajole you into helping them.’

‘They’ll hang us – or worse.’

‘Do you want to spend the rest of your lives under their yoke? Stand up to them. They’ll have to listen to reasonable requests. Even tyrants can’t function if enough people refuse to obey them.’

Machiavelli, already on his horse, took out a small black notebook and wrote in it, smiling absently to himself. Ezio swung himself into the saddle.

‘I thought you said we were in a hurry,’ said Ezio.

‘We are. I was just making a note of what you said.’

‘I hope I should be flattered by that.’

‘Oh yes, you should be. Come on.’

‘You excel at opening wounds, Ezio,’ Machiavelli continued as they rode. ‘But can you also close them?’

‘I intend to heal the sickness that is at the heart of our society, not merely tinker about with the symptoms.’

‘Bold words. But you don’t have to argue with me; we’re on the same side, don’t forget. I’m just putting across another point of view.’

‘Is this a test?’ Ezio was suspicious. ‘If so, let us talk openly. I believe that Rodrigo Borgia’s death would not have solved our problem.’

‘Really?’

‘Well, I mean, look at this city. Rome is the centre of Borgia and Templar rule. What I just said to that stableman holds true. Killing Rodrigo won’t change things – cut off the head of a man and he is dead, sure. But we are dealing with a Hydra.’

‘I see what you mean – like the seven-headed monster Hercules had to kill – and even then the heads grew back until he learned the trick of stopping that happening.’

‘Precisely.’

‘So – you suggest that we appeal to the people?’

‘Maybe. How else?’

‘Forgive me, Ezio, but the people are fickle. Relying on them is like building on sand.’

‘I disagree, Niccolò. Surely our belief in humanity is at the heart of the Assassin’s Creed.’

‘And that’s something you intend to put to the test?’

Ezio was about to reply, but at that instant a young thief ran alongside them and, with his knife, swiftly and surely cut through the leather strings that attached Ezio’s money pouch to his belt.

‘What the—!’ Ezio shouted.

Machiavelli laughed. ‘He must be from your inner circle. Look at him run! You might have trained him yourself. Go, get back what he’s stolen. We need that money. I’ll meet you at the Campidoglio on the Capitoline.’

Ezio wheeled his horse round and galloped off in pursuit of the thief. The man ran down alleys too narrow for the horse and Ezio had to go round, worried that he might lose his quarry but at the same time knowing, to his chagrin, that on foot the younger man would surely outrun him. It was almost as if the man had had some Assassin training. But how could that be?

At last he cornered the man in a blind alley and used the body of the horse to pin him up against the wall of the dead end.

‘Give it back,’ he said evenly, drawing his sword.

The man still seemed bent on escape, but when he saw how hopeless his situation was, his body slumped and, mutely, he raised the hand that held the pouch. Ezio snatched it back and stowed it away safely. But in doing so he let his horse move back a fraction, and in the wink of an eye the man had scrambled up the wall with almost extraordinary speed and disappeared over the other side.

‘Hey! Come back! I haven’t finished with you yet!’ Ezio yelled, but all he got in reply was the receding sound of running feet. Sighing, and ignoring the small crowd that had gathered, he steered the horse in the direction of the Capitoline Hill.

Dusk was falling as he rejoined Machiavelli.

‘Did you liberate your money from our friend?’

‘I did.’

‘A small victory.’

‘They add up,’ said Ezio. ‘And in time, with work, we’ll have a few more.’

‘Let’s hope we make it before Cesare’s gaze falls on us and we are broken again. He damned nearly succeeded at Monteriggioni. Now let’s get on with things.’ Machiavelli spurred on his horse.

‘Where are we going?’

‘To the Colosseum. We have a rendezvous with a contact of mine, Vinicio.’

‘And—?’

‘I’m expecting him to have something for me. Come on.’

As they rode through the city towards the Colosseum, Machiavelli commented drily on the various new buildings that had been erected by Pope Alexander VI during his administration.

‘Look at all these façades, masquerading as government buildings. Rodrigo is very clever in the way he keeps this place in business. It fools your friends the “people” quite easily.’

‘When did you become so cynical?’

Machiavelli smiled. ‘I’m not being cynical at all. I’m just describing *Roma* as she is today. But you’re right, Ezio, perhaps I am a little too bitter, a little too negative sometimes. All may not be lost. The good news is that we do have allies in the city. You will meet them. And the College of Cardinals is not completely under Rodrigo’s thumb, much as he’d like it to be, although it is touch and go …’

‘What’s touch and go?’

‘Our ultimate success.’

‘We can only try. Giving up is a sure way to failure.’

‘Who said anything about giving up?’

They rode on in silence until they reached the gloomy hulk of the ruined Colosseum, a building over which, for Ezio, the remembered horrors of the Games that had taken place there a thousand years ago, still hung. His attention was immediately caught by a group of Borgia guards with a Papal courier. Their swords drawn, halberds pointing threateningly and bearing flickering red torches, they were jostling a small, harassed-looking man.

‘*Merda!*’ said Machiavelli softly. ‘It’s Vinicio. They’ve got to him first.’

Silently, the two men slowed their horses, approaching the group quietly and with as much caution as possible in order to gain the greatest element of surprise. As they neared, they picked up snatches of conversation.

‘What you got there?’ one guard was asking.

‘Nothing.’

‘Attempting to steal official Vatican correspondence, eh?’

‘*Perdonatemi, signore*. You must be mistaken.’

‘No mistake, you little thief,’ said another guard, prodding the man with his halberd.

‘Who are you working for, *ladro*?’

‘No one.’

‘Good, then no one will care what happens to you.’

‘I’ve heard enough,’ said Machiavelli. ‘We’ve got to save him and get the letter he carries.’

‘Letter?’

‘Come on!’

Machiavelli dug his heels into his mount’s flanks, and the surprised horse bolted forward as Machiavelli tugged hard on the reins. The beast reared, forelegs kicking wildly and slamming into the temple of the nearest Borgia guard, caving his helmet into his skull. The man fell like a stone. Meanwhile, Machiavelli had swivelled himself to his right, leaning low out of his saddle. Reaching down he slashed viciously at the shoulder of the guard threatening Vinicio. The man dropped his halberd instantly and collapsed with the pain flaming through his shoulder. Ezio spurred his steed forward, careening past two other guards and using the pommel of his sword to strike fatally hard down on the first man’s head and slapping the second across the eyes with the flat of his blade. One more guard was left. Distracted by the sudden attack, he didn’t notice Vinicio grabbing the shaft of his halberd and suddenly felt himself yanked forward. Vinicio’s dagger was waiting and pierced the man’s throat. He fell with a sickening gargling sound as blood flooded his lungs. Once again, the element of surprise gave the Assassins the edge; the Borgia soldiers were clearly not used to such effective resistance to their bullying. Vinicio wasted no time and gestured to the main thoroughfare leading from the central plaza. A horse could be seen clattering away from the plaza – the courier standing hard in the stirrups urging on his steed.

‘Give me the letter. Be quick about it!’ ordered Machiavelli.

‘But I haven’t got it; he has,’ Vinicio cried, pointing towards the fleeing horse. ‘They took it from me.’

‘Get after him!’ Machiavelli shouted to Ezio. ‘Whatever it costs, get that letter and bring it to me at the *Terme di Diocleziano* by midnight. I’ll be waiting.’

Ezio rode off in pursuit.

It was easier than catching the thief had been. Ezio’s horse was better than the courier’s, and the man he was pursuing was no fighter. Ezio pulled him from the horse with ease. He didn’t like to kill the man, but he couldn’t afford to let him go and raise the alarm. ‘*Requiescat in Pace*,’ he said softly as he slit his throat. He put the letter, unopened, in his belt pouch and made a tow rope from the horse’s bridle so he could take the courier’s steed with him. He then turned his own mount and made for the ruins of the Baths of Diocletian.

It was now almost pitch dark, except for where the occasional torch guttered in a wall-mounted sconce. To reach the baths, Ezio had to cross a sizeable stretch of wasteland, and halfway across, his horse reared and neighed in fear. The other

horse followed suit and Ezio had his hands full calming them. Suddenly a blood-curdling sound came to his ears, like the howling of wolves, and yet not quite the same. Possibly worse. It sounded more like human voices imitating the animals. He spun his horse round in the dark, loosening the tow rope he'd made. Once free, the courier's horse turned tail and galloped off into the night. Ezio hoped it would find its way home in one piece.

He didn't have much time to reflect on that as he reached the deserted baths. Machiavelli had not yet arrived – no doubt he was off again on one of his mysterious private missions in the city – but then …

From among the hillocks and tussocks of grass that had grown over the remains of the ancient Roman city, figures appeared and surrounded him. Feral-looking people who were hardly human in appearance at all. They stood upright, but they had long ears, snouts, claws and tails, and they were covered in rough grey hair. Their eyes seemed to glint red. Ezio drew a sharp breath – what on earth were these devilish creatures? His eyes darted around the ruins; he was encircled by at least a dozen of these wolfmen. Ezio unsheathed his sword once more. This was not turning out to be the best of days.

With wolf-like snarls and howls, the creatures fell upon him. As they came close, Ezio could see that these were indeed men like him, only seemingly mad, like creatures in some kind of holy trance. Their weapons were long, sharp steel talons sewn firmly into the tips of heavy gloves, and with these they slashed at his legs and at the horse's flanks, trying to bring him down.

He was able to keep them at bay with his sword and, as their disguises seemed to have no chain mail or other protection under the wolfskins, he was able to wound them with the keen edge of his sword. He cut one creature's arm off at the elbow and it slunk away, wailing horribly in the darkness. The strange creatures seemed to be more aggressive than skilful, and their weapons were no match for the point of Ezio's flashing blade. He quickly pressed forward, splitting the skull of another and pierced the left eye of a third. Both wolfmen fell on the spot, mortally injured by Ezio's blows. By then the other wolfmen seemed to be having second thoughts about continuing their attack, melting into the darkness or into hollows and caves formed by the overgrown ruins surrounding the baths. Ezio gave chase, gouging the thigh of one of his would-be assailants, while another fell under the hooves of his horse, only to have his back broken. Overtaking a sixth, Ezio leant down and, turning backwards, ripped the man's stomach open so that his guts spilled onto the ground and he stumbled over them as he fell and died.

Finally, all was silent.

Ezio calmed his horse and stood up in his stirrups, willing his eyes to penetrate the darkness and his ears to pick up signals his eyes could not see. Presently he thought he could make out the sound of laboured breathing not far off, though nothing was visible. He urged his horse into a walk and softly made his way in the direction it was coming from.

It seemed to be coming from the blackness of a shallow cave, formed by the overhang of a fallen archway and festooned with creepers and weeds. Dismounting and tying his horse firmly to a tree stump, he rubbed the blade of his sword with dirt so that it would not glint and give his location away and gingerly made his way forward. For a brief second he thought he saw the flickering of a flame in the bowels of the cave.

As he inched forward, bats swooped over his head and out into the night. The place stank of their droppings. Unseen insects and doubtless other creatures clattered and scuttled away from him. He cursed them for the noise they made as it seemed as loud as thunder to him, but the ambush – if there was one – still did not come.

Then he saw the flame again, and heard what he could have sworn was a faint whimpering. He saw that the cave was less shallow than the fallen arch suggested, and that its corridor curved gently, and at the same time narrowed, leading into a deeper darkness. As he followed the curve, the flickers of flame he had glimpsed earlier resolved themselves into a small fire, in the light of which he could make out a hunched figure.

The air was slightly fresher here. There must be some airway in the roof which he could not see. That would be why the fire could breathe. Ezio stood stock still and watched.

Whimpering, the creature reached out a skinny left hand, grubby and bony, and plucked at the end of an iron bar, which was stuck in the fire. Its other end was red hot, and, tremblingly, the creature drew it out and, bracing itself, applied the end to the bloody stump of its other arm, stifling a shriek as it did so, in an attempt to cauterize the wound.

It was the wolfman Ezio had maimed.

In the moment when the wolfman's attention was bound up in his pain and the job in hand, Ezio surged forward. He was almost too late, for the creature was fast and nearly got away, but Ezio's fist closed hard around its good arm. It was difficult, for the limb was slippery with grease, and the stench the creature released as it moved was all but overpowering, but Ezio held on firmly. Catching his breath and kicking the iron bar away, Ezio said, 'What the fuck are you?'

'Urgh,' was all the reply he got. Ezio slapped the man hard round the head with his other fist, which was still sheathed in a mailed glove. Blood spurted

close to the man's left eye and he moaned in pain.

'What are you? Speak!'

'Ergh.' His open mouth displayed a broken, greyish set of teeth, and the smell that came from it made that of a drunken whore seem sweet.

'Speak!' Ezio drove the point of his sword into the stump and twisted it. He hadn't time to mess about with this wreck of a person. He was worried about his horse.

'Aargh!' Another cry of pain, then a rough, almost incomprehensible voice emerged from the inarticulate grunting, speaking good Italian. 'I am a follower of the *Secta Luporum*.'

The Sect of the Wolves? What the hell is that?'

'You will find out. What you did tonight—'

'Oh, shut up.' Tightening his grip, Ezio stirred up the fire to gain more light and glanced around. Now he saw that he was in a kind of domed chamber, possibly hollowed out deliberately. There was little in it but a couple of chairs and a rough table with a handful of papers on it, weighted down with a stone.

'My brothers will return soon, and then …'

Ezio dragged him to the table, pointing with his sword at the papers. 'And these? What are these?'

The man looked at him and spat. Ezio placed his sword point close to the bloody stump again.

'No!' wailed the man. 'Not again!'

'Then tell me.' Ezio looked at the papers. The moment would come when he would have to put his sword down, however briefly, to pick them up. Some of the writing was in Italian, some in Latin, but there were other symbols, which looked like writing, but which he could not decipher.

Then he heard a rustling, coming from the direction he had come. The wolfman's eyes gleamed. 'Our secrets,' he said.

At the same moment two more of the creatures bounded into the room, roaring and clawing at the air with their steel claws. Ezio's prisoner wrenched himself free and would have joined them if Ezio had not slashed his head from his shoulders and sent it rolling towards his friends. He tore round to the other side of the table, seizing the papers, and hurling the table over towards his enemies.

The firelight dimmed. The fire needed stirring again – either that or more fuel. Ezio's eyes strained to pick out the two remaining wolfmen. They were like grey shadows in the room. Ezio dropped back into the darkness, stashed the papers in his tunic and waited.

The wolfmen may have had the strength of the insane, but they couldn't have been very skilled, except in the art, perhaps, of scaring people to death. They

certainly couldn't keep quiet or move silently. Using his ears more than his eyes, Ezio managed to circle them, skirting the walls until he knew he was behind them, while they thought he was still somewhere in the darkness ahead of them.

There was no time to lose. He sheathed his sword, unleashed his Hidden Blade, came up, silent as a real wolf behind one of them and, holding him firmly from behind, cut his throat. He died instantly and silently, and Ezio eased the body quietly to the floor. He considered trying to capture the other, but there was no time for interrogation. There might be more of them, and Ezio wasn't sure he had enough strength to fight any more. Ezio could sense the other man's panic, which was confirmed when he left off his impersonation and called anxiously into the silent darkness, 'Sandro?'

It was a simple matter then to locate him, and again the exposed throat was Ezio's hoped-for target. This time, however, the man spun round, frantically tearing at the air in front of him with his claws. He could see Ezio, but Ezio remembered that these creatures wore no mail under their fancy dress. He withdrew the Hidden Blade, and with his larger and less subtle dagger, which had the advantage of a serrated edge, opened the man's breast. The exposed heart and lungs glistened in the dying firelight as the last wolfman fell forward, his face in the fire. A smell of burning hair and flesh threatened to overcome Ezio, but he sprang back and made his way as fast as he could, fighting down panic, to the kindly night air outside.

Once outside, he saw that the wolfmen hadn't touched his horse. Perhaps they had been too sure of trapping him to bother to kill it or drive it away. He untied it and realized he was trembling too much to mount. Instead, he took its bridle and led it back to the Baths of Diocletian. Machiavelli had better be there and he had better be well-armed. By God, if only he still had his Codex gun, or one of those things Leonardo had fashioned for his new master. At least Ezio had the satisfaction of knowing he could still win fights by using his wits and his training – two things they couldn't deprive him of until the day they caught him and tortured him to death.

He remained fully alert on the short journey back to the baths, and found himself occasionally starting at shadows – something that would not have happened to him as a younger man. The thought of a safe arrival brought him no comfort. What if there were another ambush awaiting him there? And what if these creatures had surprised Machiavelli. Was Machiavelli himself aware of the *Secta Luporum*?

Where were Machiavelli's loyalties anyway?

He reached the dim, vast ruin – a memorial to the lost age when Italy had ruled the world – in safety. There was no sign of life that he could see, but then Machiavelli himself emerged from behind an olive tree and greeted him soberly.

'What kept you?'

'I was here before you. But then I was … distracted.' Ezio looked at his colleague evenly.

'What do you mean?'

'Some jokers in fancy dress. Sound familiar?'

Machiavelli's gaze was keen. 'Dressed as wolves?'

'So you do know about them.'

'Yes.'

'Then why suggest here as a meeting place?'

'Are you suggesting that I—?'

'What else am I to think?'

'Dear Ezio.' Machiavelli took a step forward. 'I assure you, by the Sanctity of our Creed, that I had no idea they would be here.' He paused. 'But you are right. I sought a meeting place remote from men, little realizing that they too might choose such a place.'

'Unless they'd been tipped off.'

'If you are impugning my honour …'

Ezio made an impatient gesture. 'Oh, forget it,' he said. 'We've enough to do without quarrelling with each other.' In truth, Ezio knew that for the moment he would have to trust Machiavelli. And so far he had had no reason not to. He would play his cards closer to his chest in future, though. 'Who are they? What are they?'

'The Sect of the Wolves. Sometimes they call themselves the Followers of Romulus.'

'Shouldn't we move away from here? I managed to grab some papers of theirs and they might be back to collect them.'

'First, tell me if you got the letter back, and tell me quickly what else has happened to you. You look as if you've been in the wars,' said Machiavelli.

After Ezio had done so, his friend smiled. 'I doubt that they will return tonight. We are two trained, armed men and it sounds as if you well and truly thrashed them. But that in itself will have incensed Cesare. You see, although there is little proof as yet, we believe that these creatures are in the Borgia's employ. They are a band of false pagans who have been terrorizing the city for months.'

'To what purpose?'

Machiavelli spread his hands. ‘Political. Propaganda. The idea is that people will be encouraged to throw themselves under the protection of the Papacy, and in return a certain loyalty is exacted from them.’

‘How convenient. But even so, shouldn’t we be getting out of here now?’ Ezio felt suddenly and unsurprisingly tired. His very soul ached.

‘They won’t be back tonight. No disparagement to your prowess, Ezio, but the wolfmen aren’t fighters or even killers. The Borgia use them as trusted go-betweens, but their main job is to frighten. They are poor, deluded souls whom the Borgia have brainwashed into working for them. They believe their new masters will help them rebuild ancient Rome from its very beginnings. The founders of Rome were Romulus and Remus, and they were suckled as babies by a she-wolf.’

‘I remember the legend.’

‘For the wolfmen, poor creatures, it is no legend. But they are a dangerous enough tool in the Borgia’s hands.’ He paused briefly. ‘Now – the letter! And those papers you say you grabbed from the wolfmen’s lair. Well done, by the way.’

‘If they’re of any use.’

‘We’ll see. Give me the letter.’

‘Here it is.’

Hastily, Machiavelli broke the seal on the parchment. ‘*Cazzo*,’ he muttered. ‘It’s encrypted.’

‘What do you mean?’

This one was supposed to be in plain text. Vinicio is – was – one of my moles among the Borgia. He told me he had it on good authority. The fool! They are transmitting information in code. Without their code sheet we have nothing.’

‘Perhaps the papers I got hold of will help.’

Machiavelli smiled. ‘By heaven, Ezio, sometimes I thank God we are on the same side. Let’s have a look.’

Quickly he sifted through the pages Ezio had seized, and his troubled face cleared.

‘Any good?’

‘I think … perhaps …’ He read on, his brow furrowed once more. ‘Yes! By God, yes! I think we have it!’ He clapped Ezio on the shoulder and laughed.

Ezio laughed, too. ‘You see? Sometimes logic is not the only way to win a war. Luck can play a part, too. *Andiamo!* You said we had allies in the city. Come on, bring me to them.’

‘Follow me.’

15

‘What about the horse?’ Ezio asked.

‘Turn her loose. She’ll find her way back to her stable.’

‘I can’t abandon her.’

‘You must. We are going back to the city. If we let her go there, they’ll know you got back. If they find the horse out here, they’ll think – with luck – that you’re still wandering around this area and divert their search here.’

Ezio reluctantly did as he was told, and Machiavelli led him to a concealed flight of stone steps leading underground. At the foot of them a torch was burning, which Machiavelli seized.

‘Where are we?’ asked Ezio.

‘This leads to a system of ancient underground tunnels that criss-cross the city. Your father discovered them and they have remained the Assassin’s secret ever since. We can use this route to avoid any guards who are out looking for us, because you may be sure that the wolfmen who escaped will raise the alarm. They’re big, because they were used for transport and troops in ancient times, and they’re well built, too, as everything was in those days. Many of the outlets within the city have collapsed now and are blocked, so we must pick our way carefully. Stay close – it would be fatal for you to get lost down here.’

For two hours they passed through a labyrinth that seemed never-ending. On the way Ezio glimpsed side tunnels, blocked entranceways, strange carvings of forgotten gods over archways and the occasional flight of steps, some leading upwards, some leading into blackness, a few others showing a glimmer of light at their heads. Finally Machiavelli, who had kept up a steady but hurried pace all along, paused at one such flight.

‘We’re here,’ he announced. ‘I’ll go first. It’s almost dawn. We must be careful.’ He vanished up the steps.

After what seemed an age, during which Ezio wondered if he had been abandoned, he heard a whispered ‘All clear’ from Machiavelli.

Despite his fatigue, Ezio ran up the steps, glad to be back in the fresh air. He’d had enough of tunnels and caves to last a lifetime.

He emerged from a kind of big manhole into a large room, large enough to have been a warehouse of sorts once.

‘Where are we?’

‘On an island in the Tiber. It was used years ago as a depot. No one comes here now, except us.’

‘Us?’

‘Our Brotherhood. It is, if you like, our hideout in Rome.’

A burly, confident young man rose from a stool by a table, on which lay papers and the remains of a meal, and came to greet them. His tone was open and friendly.

‘Niccolò! *Ben trovato!*’ He turned to Ezio. ‘And you – you must be the famous Ezio! Welcome!’ He took Ezio’s hand and shook it warmly. ‘Fabio Orsini at your service. I’ve heard a lot about you from my cousin – an old friend of yours – Bartolomeo d’Alviano.’

Ezio smiled at the name. ‘A fine warrior,’ he said.

‘It was Fabio who discovered this place,’ put in Machiavelli.

‘Every convenience here,’ said Fabio. ‘And outside it’s so overgrown with ivy and whatnot, you wouldn’t even know it existed.’

‘It’s good to have you on our side.’

‘My family has taken a few bad blows from the Borgia of late, and my one aim is to kick their stall in and restore our patrimony.’ He looked around doubtfully. ‘Of course, this may all seem a bit shabby to you, after your accommodations in Toscana.’

‘This is perfect.’

Fabio smiled. ‘*Bene*. Well, now that you have arrived, you must forgive me but I must leave you – immediately.’

‘What are your plans?’ asked Machiavelli.

Fabio’s face became serious. ‘I am off to begin preparations for Romagna. Today, Ceasare has control of my estate and my men, but soon, I hope, we will be free again.’

‘*Buona fortuna*.’

‘*Grazie*.’

‘*Arriverderci*.’

‘*Arriverderci*.’

And, with a friendly wave, Fabio was gone.

Machiavelli cleared a space on the table and spread out the encrypted letter, together with the wolfmen’s decoding page. ‘I have to get on with this,’ he said. ‘You must be exhausted; there’s food and wine there, and good, clear Roman water. Refresh yourself while I work, for there is still much to be done.

‘Is Fabio one of the allies of whom you spoke?’

‘Indeed. And there are others. One very great indeed.’

‘And he is? Or is it a “she”?’ Ezio asked, thinking, despite himself, of Caterina Sforza. He could not get her out of his mind. She was the Borgia’s prisoner still. His own private priority was to free her. But was she playing games with him? He could not rid his mind of a grain of doubt. She was a free spirit, though; he did not own her. Only he did not relish the thought of being played for a fool. And he did not want to be used.

Machiavelli hesitated, as if he had already divulged too much, but then he spoke: ‘It is the Cardinal, Giuliano della Rovere. He was in competition with Rodrigo for the Papacy, and lost; but he is still a powerful man, and he has powerful friends. He has potentially strong connections with the French, but he bides his time – he knows that King Louis is only using the Borgia for as long as it suits him. Above all, he hates the Borgia with a deep and enduring loathing. Do you know how many Spaniards the Borgia have placed in positions of power? We are in danger of having them control Italy.’

‘Then he’s the man for us. When can I meet him?’

‘The time is not yet ripe. Eat while I work.’

Ezio was glad of the hour’s respite, but found that hunger and even thirst – at least for wine – had abandoned him. He drank some water gratefully, and toyed with a chicken leg as he watched Machiavelli pore over the papers in front of him.

‘Is it working?’ he asked at one point.

‘Shhh!’

The sun had reached the church towers of Rome by the time Machiavelli put down his quill and drew towards him the spare sheet of paper on which he’d been writing.

‘It’s done.’

Ezio waited expectantly.

‘It’s a directive to the wolfmen,’ said Machiavelli. ‘It states that the Borgia will provide their usual payment and orders the wolfmen to attack – that is, to create terrifying diversions – in various parts of the city not yet under full Borgia control. The attacks are to be timed with the “fortuitous” appearance of a Borgia priest, who will use the Powers of the Church to “banish” the attackers.’

‘What do you propose?’

‘If you agree, Ezio, I think we should begin planning our own assault on the Borgia. Carry on the good work you started at the stables.’

Ezio hesitated. ‘You think we are ready for such an attack?’

‘*Sì*.’

‘I’d like to know where the Borgia are holding Caterina Sforza first. She’d be a powerful ally.’

Machiavelli looked nonplussed. ‘If she is their prisoner, she’ll be held at the Castel Sant’Angelo. They’ve turned it into a stronghold.’ He paused. ‘It is too bad they have control of the Apple. Oh, Ezio, how could you have let that happen?’

‘You were not at Monteriggioni.’ It was Ezio’s turn to pause after an angry silence. ‘Do we *really* know what goes on with our enemies? Do we at least have an underground network here to work with?’

‘Hardly. Most of our mercenaries, like Fabio, are tied up in battle with Cesare’s forces. And the French still back him.’

Ezio remembered the French general at Monteriggioni – Octavien.

‘What have we got?’ he asked.

‘One solid source. We have girls working at a brothel. It’s a high-class joint, frequented by cardinals and other important Roman citizens, but there’s a snag. The madam we have in place is lazy, and seems rather to enjoy parties for their own sake than to further our cause by gathering information.’

‘What about the city’s thieves?’ asked Ezio, thinking about the adroit robber who’d almost cost him his purse.

‘Well, *sì*, but they refuse to talk to us.’

‘Why?’

Machiavelli shrugged. ‘I have no idea.’

Ezio rose. ‘You’d better tell me how to get out of here.’

‘Where are you going?’

‘To make some friends.’

‘May I ask what friends?’

‘I think, for the moment, you had better leave that to me.’

16

It was nightfall by the time Ezio had found the headquarters of the Roman Thieves' Guild. He'd spent a long day asking questions discreetly in taverns, getting suspicious looks and misleading answers, until, finally, word must have got round that it was all right to let him know the secret location, at which point a ragamuffin boy had led him into a rundown district, through a maze of alleys, and left him at a door, only to disappear immediately the way he had come.

It wasn't much to look at: a large, broken-down-looking inn, whose sign, showing a fox, either asleep or dead, hung awry, whose windows were shrouded with tattered blinds and whose woodwork was in need of repainting.

Unusually for an inn, its door was shut fast, and Ezio hammered on it in vain.

He was surprised by a voice coming from behind him, speaking softly. Ezio spun round. It wasn't like him to allow himself to be approached noiselessly from behind like that. He must ensure that it didn't happen again.

Fortunately, the voice was friendly, if guarded.

'Ezio.'

The man who'd spoken stepped forward from the shelter of a tree and Ezio recognized him immediately. It was his old ally, Gilberto, La Volpe – the Fox – who had led the thieves in Florence in alliance with the Assassins some time previously.

'La Volpe! What are you doing here?'

Gilberto grinned as they embraced. 'Why am I not in Florence, do you mean? Well, that's simply answered. The thieves' leader here died and they elected me. I felt like a change of air, and my old assistant, Corradin, was ready to take over back home. Besides' – he lowered his voice conspiratorially – 'just at the moment, Rome presents me with a little bit more of a … challenge, shall we say?'

'Seems a good enough reason to me. Shall we go in?'

'Of course.' La Volpe knocked at the door – obviously using a coded knock – and the door swung open almost immediately to reveal a spacious courtyard with tables and benches laid out, just as you'd expect at an inn, but all very dingy. A

handful of people, men and women, bustled about, in and out of doors that led from the courtyard into the inn itself, which was built around it.

'Doesn't look like much, does it?' said La Volpe, ushering him to a seat and calling for wine.

'Frankly—'

'It suits our purposes. And I have plans. But what brings you here?' La Volpe held up a hand. 'Wait! Don't tell me. I think I know the answer.'

'You usually do.'

'You want to put my thieves to work as spies for you.'

'Exactly,' Ezio said, leaning forward eagerly. 'Will you join me?'

La Volpe raised his beaker in a silent toast and drank a little of the wine that had been brought, before replying flatly, 'No.'

Ezio was taken aback. 'What? Why not?'

'Because that would only play into Niccolò Machiavelli's hands. No, thank you. That man is a traitor to our Brotherhood.'

This did not come as a surprise, though Ezio was very far from convinced of the truth of it. He said, 'That's a very serious allegation, coming from a thief. What proof do you have?'

La Volpe looked sour. 'He was an ambassador to the Papal Court, you know, and he travelled as a personal guest of Cesare himself.'

'He did those things on our behalf.'

'Did he? I also happen to know he abandoned you just before the attack on Monteriggioni.'

Ezio made a gesture of disgust. 'Pure coincidence. Look, Gilberto, Machiavelli may not be to everyone's taste, but he *is* an Assassin, *not* a traitor.'

La Volpe looked at him with a set face. 'I'm not convinced.'

At that point in their conversation, a thief whom Ezio recognized as the man who'd tried to steal his purse scuttled up and whispered in La Volpe's ear. La Volpe stood as the thief scuttled off. Ezio, sensing trouble, stood too.

'I apologize for Benito's behaviour yesterday,' said La Volpe. 'He did not know who you were then, and he had seen you riding with Machiavelli.'

'To hell with Benito. What's going on?'

'Ah, Benito brought news. Machiavelli is meeting someone in Trastevere very soon. I'm going to check what's going on. Care to accompany me?'

'Lead on.'

'We'll use one of the old routes – the rooftops. It's a bit tougher here than it was in Florence. Do you think you're up to it?'

'Just lead on.'

It was hard going. The roofs of Rome were spaced further apart than in Florence, and many were crumbling, making it harder to gain a footing. More than once, Ezio sent a loose tile crashing to the ground. But there were few people about in the streets, and they moved so fast that by the time any Borgia guards could react, they were already out of sight. At last they reached a market square, its stalls closed up except for one or two brightly lit wine booths, where a number of people were gathered. Ezio and La Volpe paused on a roof overlooking it, concealing themselves behind chimney stacks, and watched.

Soon afterwards, Machiavelli walked into the square, first glancing around carefully. Ezio watched keenly as another man, wearing the Borgia crest on his cloak, approached Machiavelli, discreetly handing him what looked like a note, before walking on, barely breaking his stride. Machiavelli also moved on, out of the square.

'What do you make of that?' La Volpe asked Ezio.

'I'll follow Machiavelli, you follow the other guy,' snapped Ezio tersely.

At that moment a brawl broke out at one of the wine booths. They heard angry cries and saw the flash of weapons.

'Oh, *merda*! That's some of my men. They've picked a fight with a Borgia guard,' cried La Volpe.

Ezio glimpsed Machiavelli's retreating back as he fled down a street that led towards the Tiber, then he was gone. It was too late to follow him now so he turned his attention back to the brawl. The Borgia guard lay prostrate on the ground. Most of the thieves had scattered, scrambling up the walls to the rooftops and safety, but one of them, a young man, scarcely more than a boy, lay groaning on the ground, his arm spurting blood from a flesh wound.

'Help! Help! My son has been injured!' an anguished voice rang out.

'I recognize that voice,' said La Volpe with a grimace. 'It's Trimalchio.' He looked at the wounded thief. 'And that's Claudio, his younger son!'

Borgia guards armed with guns had appeared on the parapets of two roofs on either side of the far wall of the market and were taking aim.

'They're going to shoot him,' Ezio said urgently.

'Quickly then, I'll take the group to the left, you take the one to the right.'

There were three guards on each side. Moving as unobtrusively as shadows but as swiftly as panthers, Ezio and La Volpe swept around the connecting sides of the square. Ezio saw his three gunmen raise their weapons and take aim at the fallen boy. He sprinted along the spine of the roof, his feet barely touching the tiles, and with one huge leap sprang towards the three gunmen. His jump had sufficient height for him to be able to crumple the middle gunman with the heel of his foot by connecting with the nape of the man's neck. In one movement,

Ezio landed on his feet, crouched to absorb the impact of the landing, and then straightened his knees – arms outstretched on either side of him. The two remaining gunmen fell at that instant – a dagger piercing one man's right eye from the side, the blade pushing deep into his skull, while the other gunman was felled by the needle-like point of Ezio's Hidden Blade, which punctured his ear, causing dark viscous liquid to trickle down his neck. Ezio looked up to see that La Volpe had felled his opponents with similar efficiency. After a minute of silent slaughter, all the guards with firearms were dead. But there was a fresh danger, as a platoon of halberdiers charged into the square, weapons lowered and rushing towards the unfortunate Claudio. The people in the wine booths shrank back.

'Claudio! Get out!' La Volpe yelled.

'I can't! Too much … pain …'

'Hang on.' Ezio, who was fractionally closer to where the boy lay, shouted. 'I'm coming!'

He leapt down from the rooftops, breaking his fall on the canvas roof of one of the market stalls, and was soon by the boy's side. Quickly, he checked the wound, which looked more serious than it was.

'Get up,' he ordered.

'I can't.' Claudio was clearly in a state of panic. 'They're going to kill me.'

'Look. You can walk, can't you?' The boy nodded. 'Then you can also run. Pay attention and follow me. Do exactly what I do. We've got to hide from the guards.'

Ezio drew the boy to his feet and made his way to the nearest wine booth. Once there, he melted into the crowd of nervous drinkers, and was surprised to see how easily Claudio was able to do the same. They eased their way through the booth to the side nearest the wall, while on the other side some of the halberdiers started to push their way in. Just in time, they made it to an alleyway leading off the square to safety. La Volpe and Trimalchio were waiting for them.

'We guessed you'd come this way,' said La Volpe as the father hugged his son. 'Get going,' he said to them. 'We've no time to lose. Get back to headquarters fast and have Teresina dress that wound. Go!'

'And you, keep out of sight for a while, *intesi*?' Ezio added to Claudio.

'*Molte grazie, Messere*,' said the departing Trimalchio, his arm around the boy, guiding him as he admonished him: '*Corri!*'

'You're in trouble now,' said La Volpe once they'd reached the safety of a quiet square. 'Especially after this. I've already seen posters up for you after that business at the stables.'

'None for Machiavelli?'

La Volpe shook his head. ‘No. But it’s quite possible they didn’t get a good look at him. Not many people know how handy he is with a sword.’

‘But you don’t believe that?’

La Volpe shook his head.

‘What to do about the “Wanted” posters?’

‘Don’t worry. My people are already ripping them down.’

‘Glad some of them are more disciplined than to start picking fights for no reason with Borgia guards.’

‘Listen, Ezio, there’s a tension in this city that you haven’t experienced.’

‘Really?’ Ezio hadn’t yet told his friend about the episode with the wolfmen.

‘As for the heralds, a few ducats each should be enough to shut them up,’ La Volpe continued.

‘Or … I could eliminate the witnesses.’

‘It needn’t come to that,’ said La Volpe more lightly. ‘You know how to “disappear”. But be very careful, Ezio. The Borgia have many other enemies apart from you, but none quite so irritating. They won’t rest until they have you hanging from hooks at Castel Sant’Angelo.’

‘They’ll have to catch me first.’

‘Keep your guard up.’

They returned by a circuitous route to the Thieves’ Guild, where Claudio and his father had already arrived safely. Teresina was dressing the boy’s wound, and once the bleeding had been staunched, it turned out to be nothing more than a deep cut into an arm muscle – it hurt like hell but would do no serious harm – and Claudio himself was much more cheerful.

‘What a night,’ said La Volpe, tiredly, as they sat down over a glass of Trebbiano and a plate of coarse salami.

‘You’re telling me. I could do with a few less of them.’

‘You won’t get many while the fight goes on.’

‘Listen, Gilberto,’ Ezio said. ‘I know what we saw, but I am sure you have nothing to fear from Machiavelli. You know his methods.’

La Volpe looked at him evenly. ‘Yes. Very devious.’ He paused. ‘But I have you to thank for saving Claudio’s life. If you believe Machiavelli remains loyal to the Brotherhood, then I am inclined to trust your judgment.’

‘So, how do I stand with your thieves? Will you help me?’

‘I told you I had plans to do something about this place,’ La Volpe said thoughtfully. ‘Now that you and I seem to be working together again, I’d like to know what you think, too.’

‘Are we working together?’

La Volpe smiled. ‘Looks like it. But I’m still keeping an eye on your black-suited friend.’

‘Well, it’ll do no harm. Just don’t do anything rash.’

La Volpe ignored that. ‘So tell me, what do you think we should do with this place?’

Ezio considered. ‘We need to make sure the Borgia stay away at all costs. Perhaps we could turn it into a proper working inn.’

‘I like that idea.’

‘It’ll need a lot of work – repainting, re-shingling, a new sign.’

‘I’ve got a lot of men. Under your direction …’

‘Then I will make it so.’

*

A month of respite, or at least semi-respite, followed for Ezio as he busied himself with the business of renovating the Thieves’ Guild headquarters, helped by many willing hands. Between them, the thieves represented a variety of skills, since many were tradesmen who’d been put out of work when they’d refused to kowtow to the Borgia. At the end of that time, the place had been transformed. The paintwork was bright, the windows clean and with new blinds. The roof was no longer rickety and the new sign showed a young male fox, still sleeping but certainly not dead. He looked as if, the moment he awoke, he’d be capable of raiding fifty hen coops at a stroke. The double doors gleamed on new hinges and stood open to reveal an immaculate yard.

Ezio, who’d had to go on a mission to Siena during the last week of work, was delighted by the end product when he returned. It was already up and running when he arrived.

‘I’ve kept the name,’ La Volpe said. ‘I like it. *La Volpe Addormentata*. Can’t think why.’

‘Let’s hope it lulls the enemy into a false sense of security,’ grinned Ezio.

‘At least all this activity hasn’t drawn any undue attention to us. And we run it like a regular inn. We even have a casino. My own idea. And it’s turned out to be a great source of income, since we ensure that the Borgia guards who patronize us always lose!’

‘And where—?’ said Ezio, lowering his voice.

‘Ah. Through here.’ La Volpe led the way to the west wing of the inn, through a door marked *Uffizi – Privato,* where two thieves stood guard without making it too obvious.

They passed along a corridor, which led to a suite of rooms behind heavy doors. The walls were hung with maps of Rome, the desks and tables covered with neatly stacked papers at which men and women were already working, even though it was only just past dawn.

‘This is where our real business is done,’ said La Volpe.

‘It looks very efficient.’

‘One good thing about thieves – good ones, at least,’ said La Volpe – ‘they’re independent thinkers and they like a bit of competition, even amongst themselves.’

‘I remember.’

‘You’d probably be able to show them a thing or two, if you took part yourself.’

‘Oh, I will.’

‘But it wouldn’t be safe for you to stay here,’ said La Volpe. ‘For you or for us. But visit me whenever you like – visit me often.’

‘I will.’ Ezio thought of his own lonely lodgings – lonely, but comfortable and very discreet. He’d have been happy nowhere else. He turned his mind to the business in hand. ‘Now that we are organized, the most important thing is to locate the Apple. We have to get it back.’

‘*Va bene*.’

‘We know the Borgia have it, but despite our best efforts we still haven’t been able to track it down. So far, at least, they seem to have made no use of it. I can only think they are still studying it and getting nowhere.’

‘Have they sought … expert advice?’

‘Oh, I’m pretty sure they will have, but he may be pretending to be less intelligent than he is. Let’s hope so. And let’s hope the Borgia don’t become impatient with him.’

La Volpe smiled. ‘I won’t pursue you on that. But in the meantime, rest assured we already have people scouring Rome for its location.’

‘They’ll have hidden it well. Very well. Maybe even from one another. There’s an increasingly rebellious streak in young Cesare, and his father doesn’t like it.’

‘What are thieves for but to sniff out well-hidden valuables?’

‘*Molto bene*. And now I must go.’

‘A last glass before you do?’

‘No. I have much to do now. But we will see each other again soon.’

‘And where shall I send my reports?’

Ezio considered and replied, ‘To the rendezvous of the Assassin Brotherhood on Tiber Island.’

17

It was high time now, Ezio decided, to look up his old friend Bartolomeo d'Alviano, Fabio Orsini's cousin. He'd fought shoulder-to-shoulder with the Orsini against the papal forces back in 1496 and had recently returned from mercenary service in Spain.

Bartolomeo was one of the greatest of the *condotierri*, and an old companion-in-arms of Ezio's. He was also, despite his sometimes oafish manner and a tendency to alarming fits both of anger and depression, a man of unbending loyalty and integrity. Those qualities made him one of the mainstays of the Brotherhood, those and his adamantine hatred of the Templar Sect.

But how would Ezio find him now? He would soon know. He had learned that Bartolomeo had just returned from fighting, to the barracks of his private army, on the outskirts of Rome. The barracks were well outside town, in the countryside to the north-east, but not far from one of the fortified watchtowers the Borgia had erected at various vantage points in and around the city. The Borgia knew better than to tangle with Bartolomeo – at least, not until they felt powerful enough to crush him like the cockroach they considered him to be. And their power, Ezio knew, was growing daily.

He arrived at his destination soon after the hour of *pranzo*. The sun was past its peak and the day was too hot, the discomfort mitigated by a westerly breeze. Arriving at the huge gate in the high palisade that surrounded the barracks, he pounded it with his fist.

A judas set in the gate opened and Ezio sensed an eye appraising him. Then it closed and he heard a brief, muffled conversation. The judas opened again. Then there was a joyous, baritone bellow, and after much drawing of bolts, the gate was flung open. A large man, slightly younger than Ezio, stood there, his rough army clothes in slightly less than usual disarray, with his arms held wide.

'Ezio Auditore, you old so-and-so! Come in. Come in. I'll kill you if you don't.'

'Bartolomeo.'

The two old friends embraced warmly, then walked across the barracks square towards Bartolomeo's quarters.

‘Come on. Come on,’ Bartolomeo said with his usual eagerness. ‘There’s someone I want you to meet.’

They’d arrived inside a long, low room, well lit from large windows facing the inner square. It was a room that clearly served both for living and for dining, and it was spacious and airy. But there was something very unlike Bartolomeo about it. There were clean blinds on the windows. There was an embroidered cloth spread on the table, from which the remains of lunch had already been cleared. There were pictures on the walls. There was even a bookcase. Bianca, Bartolomeo’s beloved great sword, was nowhere to be seen. Above all, the place was unbelievably tidy.

‘Wait here,’ said Bartolomeo, snapping his fingers at an orderly for wine, and clearly in a state of high excitement. ‘Now just guess who I want you to meet?’

Ezio glanced around the room again. ‘Well, I’ve met Bianca …’

Bartolomeo made a gesture of impatience. ‘No, no! She’s in the map room – it’s where she lives nowadays. Guess again.’

‘Well,’ Ezio said slyly, ‘could it possibly be … your wife?’

Bartolomeo looked so crestfallen that Ezio almost felt sorry for having made so accurate a deduction, not that it had been hard, exactly. But the big man cheered up quickly and continued, ‘She’s such a treasure. You wouldn’t believe it.’ He turned and bellowed in the direction of the inner rooms, ‘Pantasilea! Pantasilea!’ The orderly appeared again with a tray bearing sweetmeats, a decanter and glasses. ‘Where is she?’ Bartolomeo said.

‘Have you checked under the table?’ Ezio asked, tongue-in-cheek.

Just then, Pantasilea appeared, descending a staircase that ran along the western wall of the room.

‘Here she is!’

Ezio stood to greet her.

He bowed. ‘Auditore, Ezio.’

‘Baglioni, Pantasilea – now Baglioni-d’Alviano.’

She was still young – in her mid- to late twenties, Ezio judged. By her name she was from a noble family, and her dress, though modest, was pretty and tasteful. Her face, framed by fine blonde hair, was oval; her nose tip-tilted like a flower; her lips generous and humorous, as were her intelligent eyes – a deep, dark brown – which were welcoming when she looked at you, and yet seemed to withhold something of herself. She was tall, reaching Bartolomeo’s shoulders, and slender, with wide shoulders and narrow hips; long, slim arms and shapely legs. Bartolomeo had clearly found a treasure. Ezio hoped he’d be able to hang onto her.

‘*Lieta di conoscervi*,’ Pantasilea was saying.

‘*Altrettanto a lei*.’

She glanced from one man to the other. ‘We will have time to meet properly on another occasion,’ she said to Ezio, with the air of a woman not leaving men to their business, but of having business of her own.

‘Stay a little, *tesora mia*.’

‘No, Barto, you know I have to see the clerk. He always manages to bungle the accounts, somehow. And there is something wrong with the water supply. I must see to that, too.’ To Ezio she said, ‘*Ora, mi scusi, ma* …’

‘*Con piacere*.’

Smiling at both, she remounted the stairs and disappeared.

‘What do you think?’ Bartolomeo asked.

‘Charmed, truly.’ Ezio was sincere. He’d also noticed how his friend reined himself in in her presence. He imagined there’d be very little barrack-room swearing around Pantasilea. He did wonder what on earth she saw in her husband, but then, he didn’t know her at all.

‘I think she’d do anything for me.’

‘Where did you meet her?’

‘We’ll talk about that some other time.’ Bartolomeo seized the decanter and two glasses and put his free arm round Ezio’s shoulders. ‘I am very glad you’ve come. I’ve just got back from campaigning as you must know, and as soon as I heard you were in Rome I was going to send men out to locate you. I know you like to keep your lodgings secret and I don’t blame you, especially in this nest of vipers, but luckily you’ve beaten me to it. And that’s good, because I want to talk to you about the war. Let’s go to the map room.’

‘I know Cesare has an alliance with the French,’ Ezio said. ‘How goes the fight against them?’

‘*Bene*. The companies I’ve left out there, who’ll be campaigning under Fabio, are holding their own. And I’ve more men to train here.’

Ezio considered this. ‘Machiavelli seemed to think things were … more difficult.’

Bartolomeo shrugged. ‘Well, you know Machiavelli. He—’

They were interrupted by the arrival of one of Bartolomeo’s sergeants. Pantasilea was at his side. The man was in a panic While she was calm.

‘*Capitano*,’ said the sergeant urgently. ‘We need your help now. The Borgia have launched an attack.’

‘What? I hadn’t expected that so soon. Excuse me, Ezio.’ To Pantasilea, Bartolomeo cried, ‘Throw me Bianca.’

She immediately tossed the great sword across the room to him and, buckling it on, Bartolomeo ran out of the room, following his sergeant. Ezio made to

follow, but Pantasilea held him back, grasping his arm firmly.

‘Wait!’ she said.

‘What is it?’

She looked deeply concerned. ‘Ezio, let me get straight to the point. The fight is not going well – either here or out in the Romagna – we’ve been attacked on both sides. The Borgia are on one flank, the French under General Octavien on the other. But know this: the Borgia position is weak. If we can defeat them, we can concentrate our forces on the French front. Taking this tower would help. If someone could get round the back …’

Ezio inclined his head. ‘Then I think I know a way I can help. Your information is invaluable. *Mille grazie*, *Madonna d’Alviano*.’

She smiled. ‘It’s the least a wife can do to help her husband.’

18

The Borgia had launched a surprise attack on the barracks, choosing the hour of the siesta to do so. Bartolomeo's men had fought them off using traditional weapons, but as they drove them back towards the tower, Ezio could see Cesare's gunmen massing on its battlements, all armed with their new wheel-locks, which they were training on the *condottieri* swarming below.

He skirted the melee, managing to avoid any confrontation with the Borgia troops. He circled and made his way around to the back of the tower. As he'd expected, everyone's attention was focused on the battle going on at the front. He clambered up the outer walls, easily finding footholds in the rough-hewn stones from which it had been built. Bartolomeo's men were armed with crossbows, and some had matchlocks, for long-range work, but they would not be able to withstand the deadly fire of the sophisticated new wheel-lock guns.

Ezio arrived at the top, some forty feet above the ground, in less than three minutes. He heaved himself over the rear parapet, sinews straining, and silently lowered himself onto the roof of the tower. He stalked behind the musketeers, moving one quiet step after another closer to the enemy. He silently drew his dagger and unleashed his Hidden Blade. He stole up behind the men, and in a sudden frenzy of killing, dispatched four gunmen with the two blades. It was only then that the Borgia sharpshooters realized the enemy was amongst them. Ezio saw a man turn his wheel-lock towards him; he was still some 15 feet away, so Ezio simply launched his dagger through the air. It pirouetted three times before embedding itself between the man's eyes with a sickening thud. The man fell, but not before he'd squeezed the trigger of his musket – luckily for Ezio the barrel had slipped away from its intended aim, and the ball shot to the man's right, hitting his nearest colleague and passing clean through his Adam's apple before embedding itself in the shoulder of the man behind him. Both men fell, leaving only three Borgia gunmen on the tower roof. Without pausing, Ezio leapt sideways, and with the flat of his hand slapped the nearest man across the face with such force he toppled backwards over the battlements. Ezio grabbed his weapon by the barrel as the man fell and swung the gun butt into the next soldier's face. He followed his colleague over the wall with an agonized yell.

The last man raised his hands in surrender, but it was too late – Ezio's Hidden Blade had already found its way between his ribs.

Ezio grabbed another rifle and bounded down the stairs to the floor below. There were four men here, firing through narrow slits in the thick stone walls. Ezio squeezed the trigger, holding the musket at waist height. The furthest went down with the impact of the shot, his chest exploding with red gore. Taking two strides forward, Ezio swung the gun like a club, barrel first this time, connecting with another man's knee so that he crumpled. One of the remaining men had turned sufficiently to take a shot. Ezio rolled forwards instinctively and felt the air searing as the ball missed his cheek by a matter of inches and embedded itself in the wall behind. Ezio's momentum sent him crashing into the gunman and the man lurched backwards, his head crunching into the thick stone battlement. The last soldier had also swivelled round to tackle the unexpected threat. He looked down as Ezio sprang up from the floor, but only for an instant, as the Hidden Blade skewered the man's jaw.

The man who's knee Ezio had shattered stirred and tried to reach his dagger, but Ezio simply kicked the man's temple and turned, unbothered, to watch the battle unfolding down below. It was resolving itself into a rout. With no overwhelming firepower on their side any more, the Borgia soldiers fell back fast, and soon turned tail and fled, abandoning the tower to the *condottieri*.

Ezio descended the staircase to the tower's main gate, encountering a handful of guards who put up fierce resistance before succumbing to his sword. Ensuring that the tower was clear of Borgia men, he flung open the gate and went out to join Bartolomeo. The battle was over and Pantasilea had joined her husband.

'Ezio, Well done! Together, we sent those *luridi codardi* running for the hills.'

'Yes, we did.' Ezio exchanged a secret, conspiratorial smile with Pantasilea. Her sound advice had won the fight as much as anything.

'Those new-fangled guns,' said Bartolomeo. 'We've managed to capture a few, but we're still working out how to use them.' He beamed. 'Anyway, now that the Pope's dogs have fled, I'll be able to draw more men to the fight on our side. But first, and especially after this business, I want to reinforce our barracks.'

'Good idea. But who's going to do it?'

Bartolomeo shook his head. 'I'm not much good with these things. You're the one with an education, why don't you approve the plans?'

'You got some drawn up?'

'Yes. I engaged the services of a brilliant young man. A Florentine like you by the name of Michelangelo Buonarotti.'

‘Never heard of him, but, *va bene*. In return I need to know Cesare’s and Rodrigo’s every move. Can some of your men shadow them for me?’

‘One thing I’ll soon have no shortage of is men. At least, I’ve enough to give you a decent workforce for the rebuilding work, and a handful of skilled scouts to cover the Borgia for you.’

‘Excellent!’ Ezio knew that Machiavelli had spies in place, but Machiavelli tended to play his cards close to his chest and Bartolomeo didn’t. Machiavelli was a closed room; Bartolomeo the open sky. And while Ezio didn’t share La Volpe’s suspicions – which he hoped he’d now allayed – there was no harm in having a second string to his bow.

He spent the next month supervising the strengthening of the barracks, repairing the damage done in the attack, building taller and stronger watchtowers, and replacing the palisades with stone walls. When the work was complete, he and Bartolomeo took a tour of inspection.

‘Isn’t she a thing of beauty?’ beamed Bartolomeo.

‘Very impressive, I think.’

‘And the even better news is, more and more men are joining us every day. Of course, I encourage competition between them: it’s good for morale and it’s good training too, for when they go out and fight for real.’ He showed Ezio a large wooden board with his crest at the top, mounted on an easel. ‘As you can see, this board shows the ranking of our top warriors. The better they become, the higher they move up the board.’

‘And where am I?’

Bartolomeo gave him a look and waved at the air above the board. ‘Somewhere up here, I should think.’

A *condottiero* came up to tell him that one of his best men, Gian, had begun his fight down in the parade ground.

‘If you want to show off, we have sparring matches too. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got money on this boy.’ Laughing, he took his leave.

Ezio made his way to the new, improved map room. The natural light was better and the room had been enlarged to accommodate broader map tables and easels. He was poring over a map of the Romagna when Pantasilea joined him.

‘Where is Bartolomeo?’ she asked.

‘At the fight.’

Pantasilea sighed. ‘He has such an aggressive view of the world. However, I think strategy is just as important. Don’t you agree?’

‘I do.’

‘Let me show you something.’

She led the way from the room to a wide balcony overlooking an inner courtyard of the barracks. On one side of it was a sizeable new dovecote, alive with birds.

'These are carrier pigeons,' Pantasilea explained. 'Each one, sent from Niccolò Machiavelli in the city, brings me the name of a Borgia agent in Rome. The Borgia grew fat on the Jubilee of 1500. All that money from eager pilgrims, willing to buy themselves absolution. And those that would not pay were robbed.'

Ezio looked grim.

'But your various attacks have unsettled the Borgia badly,' Pantasilea continued. 'Their spies comb the city, seeking out our people and exposing them where they can. Machiavelli has uncovered some of their names as well, and these too he is often able to send me by pigeon post. Meanwhile, Rodrigo has added even more new members to the Curia, in an attempt to maintain his balance of power among the cardinals. As you know, he has decades of experience in Vatican politics.'

'Indeed he has.'

'You must take these names with you when you return to the city. They will be useful to you.'

'I am lost in admiration, *Madonna*.'

'Hunt these people down, eliminate them if you can, and we will all breathe more easily for it.'

'I must return to Rome without delay. And I will tell you something that makes *me* breathe more easily.'

'Yes?'

'What you have just disclosed proves that Machiavelli is undoubtedly one of us.' But then Ezio hesitated. 'Even so …'

'Yes?'

'I have a similar arrangement with Bartolomeo. Give it a week, then ask him to come to the island in the Tiber – he knows the place and I daresay you do, too – bringing me what he has gleaned about Rodrigo and Cesare.'

'Do you doubt Machiavelli still?'

'No, but I am sure you'll agree that it is good to double-check *all* the information one gets, especially in times like these.'

A shadow seemed to pass across her face, but then she smiled and said, 'He will be there.'

19

Back in Rome, Ezio made his first port of call the brothel Machiavelli had mentioned as another source of information – perhaps some of the names he was sending Pantasilea by carrier pigeon came from there. He needed to check on how the girls collected their information, but he'd decided to go there incognito. If they knew who he was, they might just give him the information they thought he wanted.

He arrived at the address and checked the sign: The Rosa in Fiore. There was no doubt of it, and yet it didn't look like the kind of place the Borgia *nomenklatura* might frequent – unless they went in for slumming. It certainly wasn't a patch on Paola's establishment in Florence, at least from the outside. But then, Paola's place had kept a pretty discreet shop front. He knocked dubiously on the door.

It was opened immediately by an attractive, plump girl of about eighteen, wearing a tired-looking silk dress.

She flashed him a professional smile. 'Welcome, stranger. Welcome to the Rosa in Fiore.'

'*Salve*,' he said, as she let him pass. The entrance hall was certainly a step up, but even so there was an air of neglect about the place.

'And what did you have in mind for today?' the girl asked.

'Would you be kind enough to get your boss for me?'

The girl's eyes became slits. '*Madonna* Solari isn't in.'

'I see.' He paused, uncertain what to do. 'Do you know where she is?'

'Out.' The girl was distinctly less friendly now.

Ezio gave her his most charming smile, but he wasn't a young man any more and he could see that it cut no ice with the girl. She thought he was an official of some sort. Damn! Well, if he wanted to get any further, he'd have to pretend to be a client. And if pretending to be one meant actually becoming one, so be it.

He had just decided on this course of action when the street door suddenly burst open and another girl ran in, her hair awry, her dress disarranged. She was distraught.

‘*Aiuto! Aiuto!*’ she cried urgently. ‘*Madonna* Solari—’ she sobbed, unable to continue.

‘What is it Lucia? Pull yourself together. What are you doing back so soon? I thought you’d gone off with *Madonna* and some clients.’

‘Those men weren’t clients, Agnella. They … they … said they were taking us to a place they knew down by the Tiber, but there was a boat there and they started to slap us about and drew knives. They took Madonna Solari on board and chained her up.’

‘Lucia! *Dio mio!* How did you get away?’ Agnella put an arm round her friend and guided her to a couch set along one wall. She took out a handkerchief and dabbed at a red weal that was starting to rise on Lucia’s cheek.

‘They let me go – sent me back with a message – they’re slave traders, Agnella. They say they’ll only let her go if we buy her back. Otherwise they’ll kill her.’

‘How much do they want?’ Ezio asked.

‘A thousand ducats.’

‘How much time do we have?’

‘They’ll wait an hour.’

‘Then we have time. Wait here. I’ll get her back for you.’ *Cazzo!* Ezio thought. *This looks bad. I need to talk to that woman.* ‘Where are they?’

‘There’s a jetty, *Messere*. Near Isola Tiberina. Do you know the place?’

‘Very well.’

Ezio made haste. There was no time to get to Chigi’s bank and none of its three branches was on his route, so he resorted to a moneylender, who drove a hard bargain, but made up the sum Ezio already carried to the one thousand required. Armed with this, but determined not to part with a penny of it if he could possibly avoid it, and swearing to exact interest from the bastards who’d taken the one person he most needed to talk to, he hired a horse and rode recklessly through the streets towards the Tiber, scattering the people, chickens and dogs that cluttered them as he went.

He found the boat – more of a small ship really – without difficulty, thank God, and, dismounting, ran to the end of the jetty on which it was moored, yelling Madonna Solari’s name.

Her captives were prepared for him. There were two men already on deck and they trained pistols on him. Ezio’s eyes narrowed. Pistols? In the hands of cheap little villains like these?

‘Don’t come any closer.’

Ezio backed off, but kept his finger on the release trigger of his Hidden Blade.

‘Brought the fuckin’ money, have you?’

Ezio slowly produced the pouch that contained the thousand ducats with his other hand.

‘Good. Now we’ll see if the captain’s in a good enough mood *not* to slit her fuckin’ throat.’

‘The captain! Who the hell do you think you are? Bring her out! Bring her out now!’

The rage in Ezio’s voice subdued the slave trader who’d spoken. He turned slightly and called to someone below deck, who must already have heard the interchange because two men were on their way up the companionway, manhandling a woman of perhaps thirty-five. Her makeup was badly smeared, both by tears and rough treatment, and there were ugly bruises on her face, shoulders and breasts, which were exposed where her lilac dress had been ripped apart, revealing the bodice beneath. There was blood on her dress, lower down, and she was manacled hand and foot.

‘Here’s the little treasure now,’ sneered the trader who’d first spoken.

Ezio breathed hard. This was a lonely bend of the river, but he could see Tiber Island only fifty yards in the distance. If only he could get word to his friends. If they had heard anything, they’d assume it was just a bunch of drunken sailors – God knows, there were enough of them along the riverbank – and if Ezio raised his voice or called for help, La Solari would be dead in an instant, and himself, too, unless the gunmen were bad shots, for the range was negligible.

As the woman’s desperate eyes caught Ezio’s, a third man, sloppily dressed in the sad remains of a naval captain’s jacket, came up the ladder. He looked at Ezio, then at the bag of money.

‘Throw it over,’ he said in a rough voice.

‘Hand her over first. And take off those manacles.’

‘Are you fuckin’ deaf? Throw. Over. The. Fuckin’. Money!’

Involuntarily, Ezio moved forward. Immediately the guns were raised threateningly, the captain drew a falchion and the two others took a tighter grip on the woman, making her moan and wince with pain.

‘Don’t come any closer. We’ll finish her if you do.’

Ezio stopped, but did not retreat. He measured the distance between where he stood and the deck with his eyes. His finger trembled over the trigger of the Hidden Blade.

‘I have the money; it’s all here,’ he said, waving the bag and edging one step closer while their eyes were on it.

‘Stay where you are. Don’t test me. If you take one step more, she dies.’

‘You won’t get your money then.’

‘Oh, won’t we? There’s five of us and one of you, and I don’t think you’d get a fuckin’ toe on board before my friends here had shot you in the mouth and in the balls.’

‘Hand her over first.’

‘Look, are you stupid or what? Nobody gets near this fuckin’ boat unless you want this *puttana* dead!’

‘*Messere! Aiutateme!*’ whimpered the wretched woman.

‘Shut the fuck up, you bitch!’ snarled one of the men holding her, hitting her across the eyes with the pommel of his dagger.

‘All right!’ yelled Ezio, as he saw fresh blood spurt from the woman’s face. ‘That’s enough. Let her go. Now.’

He threw the bag of money over to the captain so it landed at his feet.

‘That’s better,’ said the slave trader. ‘Now, let’s finish this business.’

Before Ezio could react, he placed the blade of his sword against the side of the woman’s throat and drew it across, down and deep, half-severing her head from her body.

‘Any objections, take it up with *Messer* Cesare,’ sneered the captain as the body slumped to the deck under a fountain of blood. Almost imperceptibly, he nodded to the two men with pistols.

Ezio knew what was coming next, and he was ready. With lightning speed he dodged both bullets, and in the same instant that he threw himself into the air, he released the Hidden Blade. With it he stabbed the first of the men who’d been holding the prisoner deep in the left eye. Before the man had even fallen to the deck, Ezio, dodging a swinging blow from the captain’s falchion and, coming up from underneath, he plunged the blade low down into the other man’s belly, ripping as he thrust. The blade wasn’t designed for slicing, and bent a little, tearing rather than cutting, but no matter.

Now for the gunmen. As he’d expected, they were frantically trying to reload their weapons, but panic had made them clumsy. He rapidly withdrew the blade and unsheathed his heavy dagger. The fighting was too close for him to be able use his sword, and he needed the dagger’s serrated edge and heavy blade. He sliced off the weapon hand of one gunman, then jabbed the point hard into the man’s side. He hadn’t time to finish the job, though, because the other gunman, coming from behind, clubbed him with the butt of his pistol. Luckily the blow didn’t find its mark, and Ezio, shaking his head to clear it, swung round and drove his dagger into the man’s chest as he raised his arms to attempt another blow.

He looked round. Where was the captain?

Ezio caught sight of him stumbling along the riverbank, clutching the bag as coins spilled from it. *Fool*, thought Ezio, *he should have taken the horse.* He bounded after him, easily catching up, for the bag was heavy. He seized the captain by the hair and kicked his legs away, forcing him to kneel with his head back.

'Now for a taste of your own medicine,' he said, and severed the captain's head exactly as he had done to *Madonna* Solari.

Letting the body fall writhing to the ground, he picked up the bag and made his way back to the boat, collecting fallen coins as he went. The wounded slave trader squirmed on deck. Ezio ignored him and went below, ransacking the meagre cabin he found there and quickly locating a small strongbox, which he wrenched open with the bloody blade of his dagger. It was full of diamonds.

'That'll do,' said Ezio to himself, tucking it under his arm and running up the companionway again.

He loaded the bag of coins and box of diamonds into the saddlebags of his horse, along with the pistols, then he returned to the wounded man, nearly slipping on the blood in which the slave trader slithered. Bending down, Ezio cut one of the man's hamstrings, keeping a hand over his mouth to stop him howling. That should slow him up. For good.

He pressed his mouth close to the man's ear.

'If you survive,' he said, 'and get back to that pox-ridden louse you call your master, tell him all this was done with the compliments of Ezio Auditore. If not, *Requiescat in Pace*.'

20

Ezio didn’t return to the brothel immediately. It was late. He returned the horse, bought a sack from the ostler for a few coins, and stowed his spoils, and the money, in it. He slung the sack over his shoulder and made his way to the moneylender, who seemed surprised and disappointed to see him back so soon, and gave him what he owed. Then he returned to his lodgings, taking care to blend in with the evening crowds whenever he sighted Borgia guards.

Once there, he had them bring him water to bathe, undressed, and washed himself wearily, wishing that Caterina would once again appear at the door and surprise him. This time there was no one to interrupt him so pleasantly. He changed into fresh clothes and shoved the ones he’d been wearing – ruined by the day’s work – into the sack. He would get rid of them later. He cleaned the pistols and put them in a satchel. He’d thought of keeping them, but they were heavy and unwieldy, so he decided to hand them over to Bartolomeo. Most of the diamonds would go to Bartolomeo, too, but after examining them, Ezio selected five of the largest and best and put them in his own wallet. They’d ensure that he wouldn’t have to waste time scraping around for money for a while, at least.

Everything else he’d get La Volpe to send to the barracks. If you can’t trust a friendly thief, who can you trust?

Soon he was ready to go out again. The satchel was slung over his shoulder and his hand was on the latch when he was overcome by tiredness. He was tired of the killing; tired of the greed, and the grasping for power, and tired of the misery that all that led to.

He was almost tired of the fight.

He let his hand fall from the door and unslung the satchel, placing it on his bed. He locked the door and undressed once more, then he snuffed out the candle and all but fell onto the bed. He just had time to remember to place a protecting arm around the bag before he fell asleep.

He knew the respite wouldn’t be long.

At The Sleeping Fox, Ezio handed over the satchel with precise instructions. He didn't like to delegate this job, but he was needed elsewhere. The reports La Volpe's spies had brought in were few, but the results coincided with those Machiavelli had sent by carrier pigeon to Pantasilea, which assuaged most of Ezio's remaining misgivings about his friend, though La Volpe remained reserved. Ezio could understand it. Machiavelli came across as remote, even cold. Although they were fellow Florentines, and Florence had no love for Rome, and especially not for the Borgia, it seemed that La Volpe, despite all the evidence to the contrary, still harboured doubts.

'Call it a gut feeling,' was all he said, gruffly, when Ezio pressed the point.

There was no news of the Apple, except that it was still in the possession of the Borgia, though whether Cesare or Rodrigo had it was uncertain. Rodrigo well knew its potential, though to Ezio it seemed unlikely that he would confide much of what he knew to his son, given the tension between them. As for Cesare, he was the last person seen in control of it, but there was no sign that he was using it. Ezio prayed that whoever he had given it to for study – if indeed he *had* done so – was either stumped by its mysteries or was concealing them from his master.

Machiavelli was nowhere to be found. Even at the Assassin's secret headquarters on Tiber Island he had left no news. The best information Ezio could get was that he was 'away', but he wasn't reported to be in Florence either. The two young friends who were temporarily in Rome at the time – Baldassare Castiglione and Pietro Bembo – and running the hideout were completely reliable, and already associate members of the Brotherhood, not least because one had connections with Cesare and the other with Lucrezia. It was a pity, Ezio thought, that the first had to return to Mantua soon and the other to Venice. He consoled himself with the thought that they would nonetheless be useful to him in their home towns.

Satisfied that he had done what he could on those fronts, Ezio turned his thoughts back to The Rosa in Fiore.

This time, when he paid a visit to the brothel, the door was open. The place seemed airier somehow, and lighter. He'd remembered the names of the girls he'd met on the day of Madonna Solari's abduction, and after having given them to the older and more sophisticated woman in the entrance hall, who, he noticed, had two well-dressed, young, polite, but tough-looking men standing guard, he was ushered through to the inner courtyard, where, he was told, he'd find the girls.

He found himself in a rose garden, surrounded by high red-brick walls. A pergola, almost hidden under luxuriant pink climbing roses, ran along one wall,

and in the centre was a small fountain with white marble benches around it. The girls he sought were with a group of others, talking to two older women whose backs were to him. They turned on his approach.

He was about to introduce himself – he'd decided to try another tack this time – when his jaw dropped.

'Mother! Claudia! What are you doing here?'

'Waiting for you. *Ser* Machiavelli told us we might find you here. Before he left.'

'Where is he? Did you see him in Florence?'

'No.'

'But what are you doing here in Rome?' he repeated dumbly. He was filled with shock and anxiety. 'Has Florence been attacked?'

'No, nothing like that,' said Maria. 'But the rumours were true: our *palazzo* has been destroyed. There is nothing for us there.'

'And even if it were not in ruins, I would never go back to Mario's *rocca* at Monteriggioni,' put in Claudia. Ezio looked at her and nodded. He understood what a backwater that place would seem to a woman like her, but his heart was troubled.

'So we have come here. We have taken a house in Rome,' continued Maria. 'Our place is with you.'

Thoughts raced through Ezio's mind. In his innermost heart, though he scarcely admitted it to his conscious mind, he still felt that he might have prevented the deaths of his father and brothers. He had failed them. Maria and Claudia were all that was left of his family. Might he not fail them in the same way? He did not want them to be dependent on him.

He attracted danger. If they were near him, would they not attract danger too? He didn't want their deaths on his head. They'd have been better off in Florence, where they had friends, where their safety, in a city once again stable under the wise management of Piero Soderini, would have been ensured.

'Ezio,' said Claudia, interrupting his thoughts. 'We want to help.'

'I sought to keep you safe by sending you to Firenze.' He tried to keep the impatience out of his voice, but found that he was snapping as he spoke. Maria and Claudia looked shocked, and although Maria let it go quickly, Ezio could see that Claudia was wounded and offended. Had she picked up something of his thoughts?

Luckily, they were interrupted by Agnella and Lucia. '*Messer*, excuse us, but we are anxious. 'We still have no news of Madonna Solari. Do you know what has become of her?'

Ezio's thoughts were still on Claudia and the expression in her eyes, but his attention switched at the question. Cesare must have done a good cover-up job. But then again, bodies were found in the Tiber practically every day, and some of them had been there for some time.

'She's dead,' he said abruptly.

'What?' cried Lucia.

'*Merda*,' said Agnella succinctly.

The news spread quickly among the girls.

'What do we do now?' asked one.

'Will we have to close?' asked another.

Ezio deduced the undercurrent of their anxiety. Under Madonna Solari, however inefficient Machiavelli had said she was, these girls had been collecting information for the Assassins. Without protection, and if, as Solari's death suggested, Cesare had his suspicions about The Rosa in Fiore, what might their fate be? On the other hand, if he had thought that Solari wasn't the *only* spy in the place, wouldn't he have made a move by now?

That was it. There was still hope.

'You cannot close,' he told them. 'I need your help.'

'But *Messere*, without someone to run things, we are finished.'

A voice near him said decisively, 'I'll do it.'

It was Claudia.

Ezio wheeled on her. 'You do not belong *here*, sister!'

'I know how to run a business,' she retorted. 'I ran Uncle Mario's estates out in the sticks for years.'

'This is quite different.'

His mother's calming voice intervened. 'What alternative do you have, Ezio? You need someone fast, evidently, and you know you can trust your sister.'

Ezio saw the logic of this, but it would mean putting Claudia on the front line – the very place he most dreaded her being. He glared at her, and she returned the look with defiance.

'You do this, Claudia, and you are on your own. You'll get no special protection from me.'

'I've done perfectly well without that for twenty years,' she sneered.

'Fine,' he returned icily. 'Then you'd better get down to work. First of all, I want this place thoroughly cleaned up, redecorated and improved in every way. Even this garden needs a good job done on it. I want this place to be the best establishment in town. And God knows you've got competition. And I want the girls clean – this new disease no one seems to know much about, it's rife in all the ports and in the biggest cities, so we all know what that means.'

‘We’ll see to it,’ replied Claudia coldly.

‘You’d better. And there’s another thing. While you’re at it, I want your courtesans to find out the whereabouts of Caterina Sforza.’ He remained stony-faced.

‘You can count on us.’

‘You’re in this now, Claudia. Any mistakes and they’re on your head.’

‘I can take care of myself, Brother.’

‘I hope you can,’ growled Ezio, turning on his heel.

21

Ezio was busy for the next few weeks, consolidating the remaining forces of the Brotherhood gathered in Rome, and deciding what use to make of the initial information he had gathered from La Volpe, and from the early reports sent by Bartolomeo. He hardly dared hope that the tide was turning against the Borgia, but it could be that he was looking at the beginning of the end. He remembered, however, the old adage about how much easier it is to handle a young lion than to approach an old, experienced one. Set against his cautious optimism was the fact that Cesare's grip on the Romagna was tightening, while the French held Milan. Nor had the French withdrawn their support from the Papal Commander. Years earlier, the Cardinal of San Pietro in Vincula, Giuliano della Rovere, the Pope's great enemy, had tried to turn the French against the Borgia and topple Alexander from his seat, but Alexander had outwitted him. How could Ezio succeed where della Rovere had failed? At least no one had poisoned the cardinal – he was too powerful for that – and he remained Ezio's trump card.

Ezio had also decided, though this he kept to himself, that his mission should be to encourage the Brotherhood to relocate their headquarters permanently to Rome. Rome was at the centre of world affairs – and the centre of world corruption. Where else could be better suited, especially now that Monteriggioni was no longer a viable option. Ezio had plans for a system of distribution of the Brotherhood's funds, in response to individual Assassins' successfully completed missions. Those diamonds he'd taken from the slave traders had come in very handy and been a welcome addition to the campaign fund.

One day …

But 'one day' was still a long way off. The Brotherhood still had no new elected leader, though by common consent, and by virtue of their actions, he and Machiavelli had become its temporary chiefs. This was only temporary, though, and nothing had been ratified in formal council.

Caterina still preyed on Ezio's mind.

He had left Claudia to oversee the renovation of The Rosa in Fiore without any supervision or interference. Let her sink or swim in her own overweening confidence. It would be no fault of his if she sank. The brothel was an important

link in his network, however, and he admitted to himself that if he really had no faith in her, he might have leaned on her harder in the first place. Now was the time to put her work – what she had achieved – to the test.

When he returned to The Rosa in Fiore, he was as surprised as he was pleased. It was just as successful as his other transformations in the city and at Bartolomeo's barracks, though he was modest and realistic enough not to take all the credit for those. He hid his delight as he took in the sumptuous rooms hung with costly tapestries, the wide sofas, the soft silk cushions and the white wines chilled with ice – an expensive luxury.

The girls looked like ladies, not whores, and from their manner someone had evidently taught them to be more refined. As for the clientele, the least he could infer was that business was booming, and though he'd had his reservations about the nature of their standing earlier, there could be no doubt now. Looking around the central salon, he could see at least a dozen cardinals and senators, as well as members of the Apostolic Camera and other officers of the Curia.

They were all enjoying themselves, all relaxed, and all – he hoped – unsuspecting. But the proof of the pudding would lie in the value of the information Claudia's courtesans were able to extract from this venal bunch of slobs.

He caught sight of his sister – modestly dressed, he was glad to see – talking rather too affectionately (to his mind) to Ascanio Sforza, the former Vice-Chancellor of the Curia and now in Rome again after his brief disgrace, trying to wheedle his way back into Papal favour. When Claudia caught sight of Ezio, her expression changed. She excused herself from the cardinal and came towards him, a brittle smile on her face.

'Welcome to The Rosa in Fiore, Brother,' she said.

'Indeed.' He did not smile.

'As you can see, it is the most popular brothel in Rome.'

'Corruption is still corruption, however well dressed it is.'

She bit her lip. 'We have done well. And don't forget why this place *really* exists.'

'Yes,' he replied. 'The Brotherhood's money seems to have been well invested.'

'That's not all. Come to the office.'

To Ezio's surprise, he found Maria there, doing some paperwork with an accountant. Mother and son greeted each other guardedly.

'I want to show you this,' said Claudia, producing a book. 'Here is where I keep a list of all the skills taught to my girls.'

‘*Your* girls?’ Ezio could not keep the sarcasm out of his voice. His sister was taking to this like a duck to water.

‘Why not? Take a look.’ Her own manner had tightened.

Ezio leafed through the proffered book. ‘You aren’t teaching them much.’

‘Think you could do better?’ she answered sarcastically.

‘*Nessun problema*,’ Ezio said unpleasantly.

Sensing trouble, Maria abandoned her accounts and came up to them. ‘Ezio,’ she said, ‘the Borgia make it difficult for Claudia’s girls. They keep out of trouble, but it’s hard to avoid suspicion. There are several things you could do to aid them …’

‘I’ll keep that in mind. You must let me have a note of them.’ Ezio turned his attention back to Claudia. ‘Anything else?’

‘No.’ She paused, then said, ‘Ezio?’

‘What?’

‘Nothing.’

Ezio turned as if to go. Then he said, ‘Have you found Caterina?’

‘We are working on it,’ she replied coldly.

‘I’m glad to hear it. *Bene*. Come to see me at Isola Tiberina the minute you have found out *exactly* where they are holding her.’ He inclined his head towards the sounds of merriment coming from the central salon. ‘With this lot to milk, you shouldn’t find it *that* difficult.’

He left them to it.

Outside in the street, he felt guilty about the way he’d behaved. They seemed to be doing a great job. But would Claudia be able to hold her own?

Inwardly, he shrugged. He acknowledged once again that the true source of his anger was his own anxiety about his ability to protect those he held most dear. He needed them, he knew, but he was aware that his fear for their safety made him vulnerable.

22

Ezio's long-awaited reunion with Machiavelli finally took place on Tiber Island soon after the encounter at the brothel. Ezio was reserved at first – he didn't like any of the Brotherhood disappearing without his knowing where they had gone – but he recognized in his heart that, for Machiavelli, he must make an exception. The Brotherhood itself was an association of free-minded, free-spirited souls, acting together not from coercion or obedience, but from a common concern and interest. He didn't own, or have any right to control, any of them.

Serious and determined, he shook hands with his old colleague – Machiavelli shunned the warmth of an embrace. 'We must talk,' he said.

'We certainly must.' Machiavelli looked at him. 'I gather you know about my little arrangement with Pantasilea?'

'Yes.'

'Good. That woman has more sense of tactics in her little finger than her husband has in his whole body – not that he isn't the best man in his own field.' He paused. 'I've been able to secure something of great worth from one of my contacts. We now have the names of nine key Templar agents whom Cesare has recruited to terrorize Rome.'

'Just tell me how I may find them.'

Machiavelli considered. 'I suggest looking for signs of distress within any given city district. Visit the people there. Perhaps you'll uncover citizens who can point you in the right direction.'

'Did you get this information from a Borgia official?'

'Yes,' said Machiavelli carefully, after a pause. 'How do you know?'

Ezio, thinking of the encounter he had witnessed with La Volpe in the market square, wondered if that might not have been the initial contact. Machiavelli must have been following it up ever since.

'Lucky guess,' he said. '*Grazie*.'

'Look, Claudia, Bartolomeo and La Volpe are waiting for you in the inner room here.' He paused. 'That *was* a lucky guess.'

'*Virtù*, dear Niccolò, that's all,' said Ezio, leading the way.

'Virtue?' said Machiavelli to himself, as he followed.

His companions in the Brotherhood stood as he entered the hideout's inner sanctum. Their faces were sombre.

'*Buona sera*,' Ezio said and got straight down to business. 'What have you discovered?'

Bartolomeo spoke first: 'We've ascertained that that *bastardo* Cesare is now at the Castel Sant'Angelo – with the Pope.'

La Volpe added, 'And my spies have confirmed that the Apple has indeed been given to someone for secret study. I am working on determining his identity.'

'We can't guess it?'

'Guesswork's no good. We need to know *for sure*.'

'I have news of Caterina Sforza,' Claudia put in. 'She will be moved to the prison within the Castel next week, on Thursday towards dusk.'

Ezio's heart involuntarily skipped a beat at this, but it was all good news.

'*Bene*,' said Machiavelli. 'So, the Castel it is. Rome will heal quickly once Cesare and Rodrigo have gone.'

Ezio held up a hand. 'Only if the right opportunity to assassinate them arises will I take it.'

Machiavelli looked irritated. 'Do not repeat your mistake in the vault. You must kill them now.'

'I'm with Niccolò,' said Bartolomeo. 'We shouldn't wait.'

'Bartolomeo is right,' agreed La Volpe.

'They must pay for Mario's death,' said Claudia.

Ezio calmed them: 'Do not worry, my friends; they will die. You have my word.'

23

On the day appointed for Caterina's transfer to Castel Sant'Angelo, Ezio and Machiavelli joined the crowd that had gathered in front of a fine carriage, its windows closed with blinds, whose doors bore the Borgia crest. Guards surrounding the carriage kept the people back, and it was no wonder, because the mood of the people was not unanimously enthusiastic. One of the coachmen leapt down from his box and hastened round to open the nearside carriage door, pulled down the steps, and stood ready to assist the occupants down.

After a moment, the first figure emerged, wearing a dark blue gown with a white bodice. Ezio recognized the beautiful blonde with the cruel lips immediately. He had last seen her at the sacking of Monteriggioni, but it was a face he could never forget. Lucrezia Borgia. She stepped down to the ground, all dignity, but this was lost as she reached back into the carriage, seized hold of something – or someone – and pulled hard.

She dragged Caterina Sforza out by her hair and flung her to the ground in front of her. Bedraggled and in chains, wearing a coarse brown dress, Caterina in defeat still had greater presence and spirit than her captor would ever know. Machiavelli had to put a restraining hand on Ezio's arm as he automatically started forward. Ezio had seen enough loved ones maltreated, but this was time for restraint. A rescue attempt now would be doomed to failure.

Lucrezia, one foot on her prostrate victim, started to speak, '*Salve, cittadini de Roma*. Hail, citizens of Rome. Behold a sight most splendid. Caterina Sforza, the she-whore of Forlì! Too long has she defied us. Now she has, at last, been brought to heel.'

There was little reaction from the crowd at this, and in the silence Caterina raised her head and cried, 'Ha! No one stoops as low as Lucrezia Borgia. Who put you up to this? Was it your brother? Or your father? Perhaps a bit of both? Perhaps at the same time, eh? After all, you all pen in the same sty.'

'*Chiudi la bocca!* Shut your mouth!' screamed Lucrezia, kicking her. 'No one speaks ill of the Borgia.' She bent down, dragging Caterina up to her knees, and slapped her hard, so that she fell into the mud again. She raised her head proudly. 'The same will happen to any – *any* – who dare to defy us.'

She motioned to the guards, who seized the hapless Caterina, dragged her to her feet, and manhandled her in the direction of the Castel gates. Still, Caterina managed to cry out, ‘Good people of Rome, stay strong. Your time will come. You will be free of this yoke, I swear it.’

As she disappeared, and Lucrezia got back into her carriage to follow, Machiavelli turned to Ezio: ‘Well, the *Contessa* hasn’t lost any of her spirit.’

Ezio felt drained. ‘They’re going to torture her.’

‘It is unfortunate that Forlì has fallen. But we will get it back. We will get Caterina back, too. But we must concentrate. You are here, now, for Cesare and Rodrigo.’

‘Caterina is a powerful ally, one of us indeed. If we help her now, while she is weak, she will aid us in return.’

‘Perhaps. But kill Cesare and Rodrigo first.’

The crowd was beginning to disperse and, apart from the sentries at the gate, the Borgia guards withdrew into the Castel. Soon only Machiavelli and Ezio were left, standing in the shadows.

‘Leave me, Niccolò,’ said Ezio as the shadows lengthened. ‘I have work to do.’

He looked up at the sheer walls of the ancient, circular structure, the Mausoleum of the Emperor Hadrian built over a thousand years earlier and now an unassailable fortress. Its few windows were high up and its walls sheer. Connected to St Peter’s Basilica by a fortified stone corridor, it had been a great Papal stronghold for nearly two hundred years.

Ezio studied the walls. Nothing was completely impregnable. By the light of the torches flickering in their sconces, as night fell, his eyes began to trace the slight ridges, fissures and imperfections which, however small, would enable him to climb. Once he’d planned his route, he leapt up like a cat to the first hand- and footholds, digging fingers and toes in, steadying his breath, and then, deliberately, unhurriedly, started to scale the wall, wherever possible keeping away from the light cast by the torches.

Halfway up, he came to an opening – an unglazed window in a stone frame, beneath which, on the inner side of the wall, was a walkway for guardsmen. He looked each way along it, but it was deserted. Silently, he swung himself over and looked down, on the other side of the walkway, over a railing into what he quickly saw was the stable yard. Four men were walking there, and he recognized every one of them. Cesare was holding some kind of conference with three of his chief lieutenants: the French general, Octavien de Valois; Cesare’s personal banker and close associate, Juan de Borgia Lanzol de Romaní; and a

lean man in black with a cruel, scarred face: Micheletto da Corella, Cesare's right-hand man and most trusted killer.

'Forget the Pope,' Cesare was saying, 'you answer only to me. Rome is the pillar that holds our entire enterprise aloft. She cannot waver. Which means, neither can you.'

'What of the Vatican?' asked Octavien.

'What? That tired old men's club?' answered Cesare contemptuously. 'Play along with the cardinals for now, but soon we shall have no more need of them.'

With that, he went through a door leading from the stable yard, leaving the other three alone.

'Well, it looks as if he's left Rome for us to manage,' said Juan after a pause.

'Then the city will be in good hands,' said Micheletto evenly.

Ezio listened for a while longer, but nothing more was said that he didn't already know, so he continued his climb around the outer wall, in a quest to locate Caterina's whereabouts. He saw light coming from another window, glazed this time, but open to the night air, and with an outer sill on which he could partially support himself. Doing so, he looked cautiously through the window into a candlelit corridor with plain wooden walls. Lucrezia was there, sitting on an upholstered bench, writing in a notebook, but every so often she looked up, as if she were expecting someone.

A few minutes later, Cesare came through a door at the far end of the corridor and made his way hurriedly towards his sister.

'Lucrezia,' he said and kissed her. It was no fraternal kiss.

Once they had greeted one another, he took her hands from round his neck and, still holding them and looking into her eyes, said, 'I hope you are treating our guest with kindness.'

Lucrezia grimaced. 'That mouth on her … How I'd love to sew it shut.'

Cesare smiled. 'I rather like it open, myself.'

'Oh, really?'

Ignoring her archness, he continued, 'Have you talked to our father about the funds requested by my banker?'

'The Pope is at the Vatican just now, but he might need some convincing when he returns. As will his own banker. You know how cautious Agostino Chigi is.'

Cesare laughed briefly. 'Well, he certainly didn't get rich by being rash.' He paused. 'But that shouldn't be a problem, should it?'

Lucrezia wound her arms round her brother's neck again, nuzzling against him. 'No, but … it gets quite lonely sometimes without you here. You and I

spend so little time together these days, busy as you are with your *other* conquests.'

Cesare held her to him. 'Don't worry, kitten. Soon, once I have secured the throne of Italy, you are going to be my queen, and your loneliness will be a thing of the past.'

She withdrew a little and looked him in the eye. 'I cannot wait.'

He ran his hand through her fine blonde hair: 'Behave yourself while I am gone.'

Then, after another lingering kiss, Cesare left his sister by the door through which he'd entered, while Lucrezia, looking downcast, went in the opposite direction.

Where was Cesare going? Was he leaving immediately? From that leave-taking, it looked likely. Quickly, Ezio manoeuvred himself around the circumference of the wall until he could take up a position that overlooked the Castel's main gate.

And not before time. As he watched, the gate was being thrown open amid cries from the guards of, 'Attention! The Captain-General is leaving for Urbino!' And shortly afterwards, on a black horse, Cesare rode forth, accompanied by a small entourage.

'*Buona fortuna, Padrone* Cesare!' cried one of the officers of the Watch.

Ezio watched his arch-enemy ride off into the night. *That was a flying visit*, he thought to himself. *And no chance to kill him at all. Niccolò will be very disappointed.*

24

Ezio turned his attention back to the task in hand: finding Caterina. High up on the western side of the Castel he noticed a small window set deep in the wall, from which a faint light came. He made his way to it. When he reached it, he saw that there was no sill on which to rest; instead there was a narrow transom projecting above the window, which he could cling to securely with one hand.

He looked into the room. It was empty, though a torch burned on one wall. It looked like a guardroom, though, so Ezio hoped he was on the right track.

Further along on the same level was another, similar window. Ezio made his way to it and peered through the bars, though there seemed no reason for them. No one slim enough to escape through this window would be able to climb down a good 150 feet to the ground and then make it across the open ground to the river and possible safety. The light was dimmer here, but Ezio could see immediately that it was a cell.

He drew in his breath sharply. There, still in chains, was Caterina! She sat on a rough bench against one wall, but Ezio could not see if she was chained to it. Her head was down, and Ezio did not know if she was awake or asleep.

Whatever the case, she raised her head at a thunderous hammering on the door.

'Open up!' Ezio heard Lucrezia cry.

One of the two guards outside the door, who had both been dozing, hastened to obey. 'Yes, *Altezza*. At once, *Altezza*.'

Once inside the cell, and followed by one of the guards, Lucrezia wasted no time at all. From the conversation Ezio had already heard, he could guess the reason for her fury: jealousy. Lucrezia believed that Caterina and Cesare had become lovers. He could not believe that to be true. The thought of Caterina being defiled by such a monster of depravity was something his mind refused to accept.

Lucrezia rushed across the cell and pulled Caterina to her feet by her hair, bringing her face close to her prisoner's. 'You bitch! How was your journey from Forlì to Rome? Did you ride in Cesare's private carriage? What did you get up to?'

Caterina looked her in the eye. ‘You’re pathetic, Lucrezia. Even more pathetic if you think I’d live by the same standards as you.’

Enraged, Lucrezia threw her to the floor. ‘What did he talk about? His plans for Naples?’ She paused. ‘Did you … enjoy it?’

Wiping blood from her face, Caterina said, ‘I really can’t remember.’

Her quiet insolence drove Lucrezia into a blind fury. Pushing the guard aside, she seized an iron bar used for securing the door and brought it down heavily across Caterina’s back. ‘Perhaps you will remember *this*!’

Caterina screamed in intense pain and Lucrezia stood back, satisfied.

‘Good. That’s put you in your place at last.’

She threw the iron rod onto the floor and strode out of the cell. The guard followed her and the door slammed shut. Ezio noticed that there was a grille set into it.

‘Lock it, and give me the key,’ ordered Lucrezia from the outside.

There was a rattle and a rusty creak as the key turned, then a chain clattered as the key was handed over.

‘Here it is, *Altezza*.’ The man’s voice was trembling.

‘Good. Now, if I come back and catch you asleep at your post, I’ll have you flogged. One hundred lashes. Understood?’

‘Yes, *Altezza*.’

Ezio listened to Lucrezia’s footsteps as they grew fainter. He considered. The best way to reach the cell would be from above.

He climbed up until he came to another opening, which gave onto a guard’s walkway. This time, sentries were on duty, but it seemed that there were only two, patrolling together. He calculated that it must take them five minutes to complete the circuit, so he waited until they had passed, then swung himself inside once again.

Crouching low, Ezio followed the guards at a distance until he came to a doorway in the wall from which a stone stairway led downwards. He knew that he’d climbed into the Castel two floors above where Caterina’s cell was located, and so, two flights down, he left the stairway and found himself in a corridor similar to the one in which he’d seen the encounter between Cesare and Lucrezia, only this time it was clad in stone, not wood. He doubled back in the direction of Caterina’s cell, encountering no one but passing a number of heavy doors, each with a grille, suggesting they were cells. As the wall curved following the line of the Castel, he heard voices ahead and recognized the Piedmontese accent of the guard who’d been talking to Lucrezia.

‘This is no place for me,’ he was grumbling. ‘Did you hear the way she spoke to me? I wish I was back in fucking Torino.’

Ezio edged forward. The guards were facing the door when Caterina appeared at the grille. She spotted Ezio behind them as he withdrew into the shadows.

‘Oh, my poor back,’ she said to the guards. ‘Can you give me some water?’

There was a jug of water on the table near the door, which the two guards had been sitting at. One of them picked it up and brought it close to the grille.

‘Anything else you require, princess?’ he asked sarcastically.

The guard from Turin sniggered.

‘Come on, have a heart,’ said Caterina. ‘If you open the door, I might show you something worth your while.’

The guards immediately became more formal. ‘No need for that, *Contessa*. We have our orders. Here.’

The guard with the water jug unlatched the grille and passed it through to Caterina, closing the grille again afterwards.

‘About time we were relieved, isn’t it?’ said the Piedmontese guard.

‘Yes, Luigi and Stefano should have been here by now.’

They looked at each other.

‘Do you think that bitch Lucrezia will be back any time soon?’

‘Shouldn’t think so.’

‘Then why don’t we take a look in the guard room and see what’s keeping them?’

‘All right. It’ll only take us a couple of minutes.’

Ezio watched as they disappeared round the curve of the wall, and then he was at the grille.

‘Ezio,’ breathed Caterina. ‘What the hell are you doing here?’

‘Visiting my tailor – what do you think?’

‘For Christ’s sake, Ezio, do you think we have time for jokes?’

‘I’m going to get you out. Tonight.’

‘If you do, Cesare will hunt you down like a dog.’

‘He’s already trying to do that, but, judging by these two, his men don’t seem all that fanatical. Do you know if the guards have another key?’

‘I don’t think so. The guards handed theirs to Lucrezia. She paid me a visit.’

‘I know. I saw.’

‘Then why didn’t you do anything to stop her?’

‘I was outside the window.’

‘Out *there*? Are you mad?’

‘Just athletic. Now, if Lucrezia has the only key, I’d better go and get it. Do you know where she is?’

Caterina considered. ‘I heard her mention that her quarters are at the very top of the Castel.’

‘Excellent. That key is as good as mine. Now stay here until I get back.’

Caterina gave him a look, glanced at her chains and then at the cell door. ‘Why, where do you think I *might* go?’ she said with a dry smile.

25

He was getting used to the contours of the outer walls of the Castel Sant'Angelo by now, and he found that, the higher he climbed, the easier it was to find hand and footholds. Clinging like a limpet, his cape billowing slightly in the breeze, he soon found himself on a level with the highest parapet, and silently hauled himself up onto it.

The drop on the other side was slight – four feet to a narrow brick walkway, from which stairs led down, at occasional intervals, to a rooftop garden, in the centre of which was a one-storey stone building with a flat roof. The building had broad windows, so it wasn't an additional fortification, and the light of many candles blazed within, revealing opulent and tastefully decorated rooms.

The walkway was deserted, but the garden was not. On a bench under the spreading bows of a buttonwood tree, Lucrezia sat demurely, holding hands with a handsome young man whom Ezio recognized as one of Rome's leading romantic actors, Pietro Benintendi. Cesare wouldn't be too pleased if he knew about this! Ezio, a mere silhouette, crept along the walkway to a point as close to the couple as he dared, grateful for the moon, which had risen by now, providing not only light but also confusing, camouflaging pools of shade. He listened.

'I love you so, I want to sing it to the heavens,' Pietro said ardently.

Lucrezia shushed him. 'Please, you must whisper it only to yourself. If Cesare found out, who knows what he would do.'

'But you are free, are you not? Of course I heard about your late husband and I am very sorry, but—'

'Quiet, you fool!' Lucrezia's hazel eyes glittered. 'Do you not know that Cesare had the Duke of Bisceglie murdered – my husband was strangled.'

'What?'

'It's true.'

'What happened?'

'I loved my husband, and Cesare grew jealous. Alfonso was a handsome man, and Cesare was conscious of the changes the New Disease had made to his own face, though God knows they are slight. He had his men waylay Alfonso, and beat him up. He thought that would act as a warning. But Alfonso was no

puppet. He hit back and, while he was still recovering from Cesare's attack, had his own men retaliate. Cesare was lucky to escape the fate of St Sebastiano! But then, cruel man, he had Micheletto da Corella go to his bedchamber where he lay nursing his wounds, and strangle him there.'

'It isn't possible.' Pietro looked nervous.

'I loved my husband. Now, I make-believe to Cesare, to allay his suspicions, but he is a snake – always alert, always venomous.' She looked into Pietro's eyes. 'Thank God I have you to console me. Cesare has always been jealous of where I place my attentions, but that should not deter us. Besides, he has gone to Urbino to continue his campaigning. There is nothing to hinder us.'

'Are you sure?'

'I will keep our secret – if you will,' said Lucrezia intensely. She disengaged one hand from his and moved it to his thigh.

'Oh, Lucrezia,' sighed Pietro. 'How your lips call to me.'

They kissed, delicately at first, then more and more passionately. Ezio shifted his position slightly and inadvertently kicked a brick loose, which fell into the garden. He froze.

Lucrezia and Pietro sprang apart.

'What was that?' she said. 'No one is allowed access to my garden and my apartments without my knowledge – no one!'

Pietro was already on his feet, looking around fearfully. 'I'd better go,' he said hastily. 'I have to prepare for my rehearsal – scan my lines for the morning. I must go.' He stooped to give Lucrezia a last kiss. 'Farewell, my love.'

'Stay, Pietro, I'm sure it was nothing.'

'No, it's late. I must go.'

Putting on a melancholy expression, he slipped away across the garden and vanished through a door set into the wall on the far side.

Lucrezia waited a moment, then stood and snapped her fingers. Out of the shelter of some tall shrubs growing nearby, one of her personal guard emerged and bowed.

'I heard the entire exchange, *mia signora*, and can vouch for it.'

Lucrezia pursed her lips. 'Good. Tell Cesare. We shall see how he feels when the boot is on the other foot.'

'Yes, s*ignora*.'

Bowing again, the guard withdrew.

Left alone, Lucrezia picked a marguerite from a clump of flowers that was growing nearby, and started to pluck its petals off, one by one.

'He loves me; he loves me not; he loves me; he loves me not …'

Ezio slipped down the nearest staircase and made his way towards her. She had sat down again and looked up at his approach, though she showed no fear, only slight surprise. Well, if she had any more guards concealed in the garden, Ezio would give them short shrift.

'Please continue. I do not mean to interrupt,' Ezio said, bowing, though in his case the bow was not made without irony.

'Well, well. Ezio Auditore da Firenze.' She gave him her hand to kiss. 'How pleasant to meet you properly at last. I've heard so much about you, especially recently. That is, I imagine no one else can have been responsible for the little upsets we have been experiencing here in Rome?' She paused. 'It's a pity Cesare is no longer here. He would have enjoyed this.'

'I have no quarrel with you personally, Lucrezia. Free Caterina and I will stand down.'

Her voice hardened slightly. 'I'm afraid that is impossible.'

Ezio spread his hands. 'Then you leave me no choice.' He closed in on her, but cautiously. She had long fingernails.

'Guards!' she shrieked, turning in an instant from noblewoman to harpy, and slashing at his eyes as – just in time – he caught her wrists. Pulling a length of twine from his leather pouch he twisted her wrists behind her and tied them swiftly, before flinging her to the ground and placing one foot firmly on a fold of her dress so that she could not rise and run. Then he drew his sword and dagger and stood his ground, ready to face the four or five guards who came running from the direction of the apartments. Luckily for Ezio they were lightly armed and heavily built, and wore no chain mail. Though unable to change his position – for above all he could not afford to have Lucrezia escape, even though she was trying to bite his ankle through his boot – he ducked below the swinging blade of the first guard and hacked at the man's exposed flank. One down. The second guard was more cautious, but conscious of the now snarling Lucrezia on the floor, he stepped forward to attack Ezio. He lunged at Ezio's chest, but Ezio parried upwards, locking the guards of both blades and swinging his left hand, dagger pointing forward, at the man's head. Two down. The final man, hoping to take advantage of the fact that both of Ezio's blades were engaged, rushed forward. Ezio flicked his right arm hard – sending the blade of the second guard spiralling up towards the new foe. The final guard had to raise his sword to deflect the blow – but just too late and the flying blade nicked his bicep. He winced with pain but came forward again, sword swinging at Ezio. Ezio had recovered his stance and deflected the attack with his dagger, freeing his sword hand to slash viciously at the man's torso. It was over. The guards lay dead

around him – and Lucrezia was silent for the first time. Breathing hard, Ezio pulled his captive to her feet.

'Now come on,' he said. 'And don't scream. If you do, I will be forced to take your tongue.'

He dragged her towards the door through which Pietro had left, found himself in a corridor, and half-pushed, half-dragged Lucrezia back down the tower, in the direction of the cells.

'Rescuing princesses from castles now? How romantic!' Lucrezia spat.

'Shut up.'

'I suppose you think you're achieving great things, charging around, creating havoc, killing whomever you wish?'

'I said, shut up.'

'But does your plan have any form? What do you think you are going to achieve? Don't you know how strong we are?'

Ezio hesitated at a staircase leading down to the next floor. 'Which way?' he asked her.

She laughed, and didn't reply.

He shook her. 'Which *way*?'

'To the left,' she replied sullenly.

She was silent for a while, then started again. This time Ezio let her ramble on. He was sure of where he was now. She squirmed in his grip, but he was concentrating on two things: keeping a firm hold of her, and being alert for any ambush by the Castel guards.

'Do you know what became of the remains of the Pazzi family in Florence once you'd brought them to their knees? Your dear friend Lorenzo the so-called *Magnifico* stripped them of all their possessions and threw them into prison. All of them! Even those who'd played no part in the conspiracy against him.' Ezio's mind turned unwillingly to the revenge Caterina had taken over a rebellion against her in Forlì. Her measures had far exceeded Lorenzo's – indeed, they made them look mild. He shook the thoughts away.

'The women were forbidden to marry and the family tombstones were erased,' Lucrezia went on. 'Wiped from the history books. Poof! Just like that!'

But they were not tortured and killed, thought Ezio. Well, it was possible that Caterina had felt justified in her actions at the time. Still, her cruelty had cost her some of the loyalty she had always been able to depend on before, and perhaps that was why Cesare had finally been able to take Forlì.

She was still an important ally, though, and that was what Ezio had to remember. That, and to suppress whatever feelings – real or imagined – he may have felt for her.

‘You and your Assassin friends ignored the consequences of your actions. You were content to set things in motion, but you were never willing to see them through.’ Lucrezia paused for breath and Ezio gave her a savage yank forwards, but that didn’t stop her: ‘Unlike you, Cesare will finish what he started, and bring peace to Italy. He kills for a higher purpose – again, unlike you.’

‘The ignorant and the passive make easy targets,’ retorted Ezio.

‘Say what you like,’ replied Lucrezia, realizing she had touched a nerve. ‘In any case, my words are wasted here, you *ipocrita*.’

They had all but reached the cells now. ‘Remember,’ Ezio said, drawing his dagger, ‘if you try to warn your guards, your tongue …’

Lucrezia breathed hard, but was silent. Watchfully, Ezio inched forward. The two new guards were seated at the table, playing cards. Throwing Lucrezia to the ground in front of him, he leapt on them and dispatched them both before they had a moment to react. Then he spun round and charged after Lucrezia, who had got to her feet and begun to run back the way she’d come, screaming for help. He caught up with her in two bounds, clapped a hand over her mouth and pulled her to him with his other arm, swinging her round and pushing her back towards Caterina’s cell. She bit and tore at the gloved hand over her mouth, then, seeing she was powerless, appeared to give up and went limp.

Caterina was already at the grille, which Ezio unlatched.

‘*Salute*, Lucrezia,’ said Caterina, smiling unpleasantly. ‘How I’ve missed you.’

‘*Vai a farti fottere, troia* – Go fuck yourself, you whore!’

‘Charming as always,’ said Caterina. ‘Ezio, bring her close. I’ll take the key.’

She reached out as Ezio obeyed her order. He noticed that Caterina caressed Lucrezia’s breasts as she reached between them and extracted the key, which hung on a black silk cord.

Caterina passed the key to Ezio, who quickly unlocked the door. The same key fitted the padlock securing the chains – Caterina had not, after all, been chained to the wall – and as Caterina divested herself of these, Ezio shoved Lucrezia into the cell.

‘Guards! Guards!’ screamed Lucrezia.

‘Oh, shut up,’ said Caterina, picking up a dirty rag from the guards’ table and using it to gag her enemy. Then Ezio took some more twine and bound Lucrezia’s ankles, before slamming the cell door shut and locking it securely.

Ezio and Caterina looked at each other.

‘My hero,’ she said drily.

Ezio ignored that. ‘Can you walk?’

Caterina tried, but stumbled. ‘I don’t think I can – the manacles they had on me must have done some damage.’

Ezio sighed and lifted her into his arms. He’d have to drop her like a sack if they were surprised by the guards and he needed to get to his weapons quickly.

‘Which way?’ she asked.

‘Stables first, then the quickest route out of here.’

‘Why save me, Ezio? Seriously? With Forlì taken, I am useless to you.’

‘You still have a family.’

‘It isn’t your family.’

Ezio kept walking. He remembered where the stables should be in relation to where they were. It was fortunate that Caterina seemed to be the only prisoner in this section, so there were no other guards about. Still, he trod softly and moved quickly, but not so fast as to lumber into a trap. Every so often he stopped and listened. She was light in his arms and, despite imprisonment, her hair still smelt of vanilla and roses, reminding him of happier times they had had together.

‘Listen, Ezio, that night in Monteriggioni, when we … bathed together … I had to ensure your allegiance. To protect Forlì. It was in the Assassin Brotherhood’s interests as much as mine, but—’ she broke off. ‘Do you understand, Ezio?’

‘If you had wanted my allegiance, all you had to do was ask for it.’

‘I needed you on my side.’

‘My loyalty and my sword arm on your side weren’t enough. You wanted to be sure of my heart as well.’ Ezio walked on, shifting her weight in his arms. ‘But, *è la politica*. Of course, I knew it. You need not explain.’

His heart felt as if it had fallen down a bottomless mineshaft. How *could* her hair still be scented?

‘Caterina,’ he asked, his throat dry. ‘Did they … ? Did Cesare … ?’

She sensed, however dimly, what he felt, and smiled – with her lips, though, he noticed, not with her eyes. ‘Nothing happened. My name must still have some small value. I was left … unspoiled.’

They had reached the main door of the stables. It was unguarded, but firmly closed. Ezio put Caterina down. ‘Try to walk a little. You must get the strength back in your ankles.’

He looked around for a means of opening the door, which had no bolts or handles. There had to be a way …

‘Try over there,’ said Caterina. ‘Isn’t that a lever of some kind?’

‘Wait here,’ Ezio said.

‘As if I had a choice.’

He made his way over to the lever, noticing as he went a square hole in the floor with an open trap door above it. From the smell beneath it must have been some sort of grain store. And peering down, he could make out a large number of sacks, and boxes, too – boxes of what looked like gunpowder.

'Hurry,' said Caterina.

He took the lever in his hands and hauled on it. It was stiff at first, but under the strain of his muscles, it gave, a little at first, and then swung over easily. At the same time the door swung open.

There were a couple of guards in the stable, who whirled round at the sound of the door creaking on its hinges, and rushed towards it, drawing their swords.

'Ezio! *Aiuto!*'

He sped over to Caterina, picked her up and carried her towards the hole in the floor.

'What are you doing?!'

He held her over the hole.

'Don't you dare!'

He dropped her down, unable to resist a short snicker at her yell of panic. It wasn't far, and he had time to see her land safely on the soft sacks before turning to face the guards. The fight was short and sharp as the guards were heavy with fatigue and had been taken by surprise. Ezio's skills with a blade were more than a match for them. One of them managed to get a glancing blow in, but it only cut the material of Ezio's doublet and didn't reach the flesh. Ezio himself was tiring.

When it was over, Ezio reached down and hauled Caterina out.

'*Figlio di puttana*,' she swore, dusting herself down. 'Never do that to me again.'

He noticed that she seemed to be walking at least a little better already.

Quickly, he selected horses for them and soon had them saddled and ready. He helped her onto one, and leapt into the saddle of the other himself. An archway led off one side of the stables and through it he could see the main gate of the Castel. It was guarded, but it was open. Dawn was approaching, and no doubt tradesmen from the city were expected, to make deliveries.

'Ride like hell,' Ezio told her, 'before they have time to realize what's going on, across the bridge and then make for Tiber Island. You'll be safe there. Find Machiavelli. He'll be waiting for me.'

'But we *both* have to get away from here.'

'I'll follow. But for now I must stay and take care of the remaining guards, create a diversion, a delay, something.'

Caterina pulled the reins of her horse in, so that it reared. 'Get back in one piece,' she said. 'Or I will never forgive you!'

Ezio hoped she meant it as he watched her kick the horse into a gallop. She charged past the guards at the main gate, scattering them. As soon as he saw that she was clear, he rode his own horse back through the stable to the grain and powder store, seizing a torch from its sconce as he passed. This he threw into the hole, and then wheeled round and galloped back the way he had come, drawing his sword.

The guards had formed a cordon and were waiting for him, halberds raised. Ezio didn't know the horse, but he knew what he had to do: he rode straight at the line of guards, and at the last minute pulled hard on the reins and, leaning forward in the saddle, dug his heels in. At the same time as the horse charged forward, there was an almighty explosion from near the stable. He was right; it had been gunpowder. The ground shook with the explosion, and the guards instinctively ducked down. The horse, also shocked by the noise of the bang, was even more determined to make good her flight. She flew into the air, clearing the line of guards as easily as she might have cleared a fence.

Leaving panic and confusion in his wake, he rode in the direction of the rising sun. His heart swelled within him. He had saved Caterina!

26

Once he was sure he had shaken off any possible pursuers, Ezio turned his horse. He was loath to lose such a good animal, but he took it to the stables where he and Machiavelli had hired horses what seemed like a lifetime ago, and turned it over to the chief ostler there. The stables were neat and clean and clearly doing a thriving business, in a district that seemed to have shaken off Borgia control and, for the moment at least, maintained its independence. Then he made his way back towards Tiber Island on foot. The Assassin secret ferry was waiting at the bank, and once on the island itself, he hastened towards the hideout.

Inside, he found that Caterina had arrived safely. She was lying on a makeshift bed near the door, being tended by a doctor. She smiled as she saw him, and tried to sit up, but the doctor gently restrained her.

'Ezio! I am relieved to see you safe.'

He took her hand and squeezed it. 'Where is Machiavelli?' There was no return of his pressure, but perhaps she was still too weak.

'I don't know.'

La Volpe emerged from the shadows at the end of the room. 'Ezio! Good to see you again!' He embraced the younger man. 'I brought your *Contessa* here. As for Machiavelli …'

Just then the main door swung open and Machiavelli himself came in. He looked drawn.

'Where have you been?' asked La Volpe.

'Looking for Ezio – not that I am accountable to you,' said Machiavelli. Ezio was saddened to note the tension that still existed between his two friends. Machiavelli turned to Ezio and, without ceremony, asked, 'What of Cesare and Rodrigo?'

'Cesare left almost immediately for Urbino. As for Rodrigo, he was at the Vatican.'

'That's odd,' said Machiavelli. 'Rodrigo should have been in the Castel.'

'Very odd indeed,' put in La Volpe evenly.

If he'd noticed the dig, Machiavelli ignored it. 'What a wasted opportunity,' he mused. Then, recollecting himself, he said to Caterina. 'No offence, *Contessa*.

We are glad to see you safe.’

‘I take none,’ she said.

‘Now that Cesare has gone to Urbino, we must concentrate on building our forces here.’

Machiavelli raised his eyebrows. ‘But I thought we intended to strike now! We should go after him and cut him down where he stands.’

‘That would be impossible,’ Caterina said. ‘I have seen his army. It is massive. You would never reach him.’

Ezio said, ‘I say we work here, in Rome. Here, we have already made a good start. We should continue to erode the Borgia influence, while restoring our own. And, in fact, I want to begin immediately.’

‘You speak as if you were already our leader,’ said Machiavelli, ‘but the post has not been discussed, let alone ratified, by our council.’

‘And I say we need a leader, and we need one right away,’ countered La Volpe. ‘We have no time for councils and ratifications. We need to consolidate the Brotherhood once again and, for my money, Ezio is the right man for the job. Machiavelli, I appeal to you – you and I are two of the most senior Assassins left. Bartolomeo is bound to agree. Let us make this decision now – keep it secret if you like – and later we can put it to a formal vote.’

Machiavelli seemed to be on the point of speech, but then let it go and simply shrugged.

‘I will not fail you,’ Ezio said. ‘Gilberto, I’d like you to bring Bartolomeo and my sister Claudia here. There are matters to discuss. Niccolò, please come with me.’

On his way out, Ezio paused by Caterina’s bed. ‘Take care of her,’ he said to the doctor.

‘Where are we going?’ Machiavelli asked once they were back in the city centre.

‘There’s something I want to show you.’

He led the way to the nearest market square. Half of it was open for business; there was a baker, a butcher was swatting flies away from his wares, and a greengrocer had a selection of rather tired-looking produce on sale. Early as it was, it was the wine shops that were doing the best business. And, as Ezio expected, a small knot of Borgia guards were duffing up the hapless owner of a leather-goods stall.

‘Look,’ said Ezio as they blended in with the small crowd of shoppers.

‘I know what is going on,’ said Machiavelli.

‘I know you do, Niccolò,’ said Ezio. ‘Forgive me, but you see the big picture. You understand what is to be done politically to break the Borgia, and I for one

do not doubt your sincerity in this.' He paused. 'But we must start at a more fundamental level. The Borgia take what they want from the people with complete impunity, to maintain their power.'

They watched the guards push the man to the ground, then, laughing, help themselves to what they fancied from his stall and move on. The man picked himself up, watched them go in impotent rage and then, close to tears, began to rearrange his goods. A woman came up to comfort him, but he shook her off. Nevertheless she stayed, hovering near him, care and concern in her eyes.

'Why did you not help him?' asked Machiavelli? 'Send them packing?'

'Look,' said Ezio. 'Helping one man is good, but it will not solve the problem. They will come back, when we are not here, and they will do the same again. Look at the quality of the stuff on offer here. The vegetables are old, the meat is flyblown and the bread, no doubt, is hard. The best goes to the Borgia. And why do you think so many people are drinking?'

Machiavelli said, 'I do not know.'

'Because they are in pain,' Ezio replied. 'They are without hope and they are oppressed. They want to blot it all out. But we can *change* that.'

'How?'

'By recruiting them to our cause.' He spread his arms. 'These people – these are the ones who will form the backbone of our resistance to the Borgia.'

'We've talked of this before,' said Machiavelli sharply. 'You cannot be serious.'

'I'm going to start with that stallholder. To win this war, Niccolò, we need loyal soldiers, however they fight for us. We must sow the seeds of rebellion in their minds.' He paused, then continued earnestly, 'By recruiting those whom the bullying state has made its enemies, we arm the people who have been disarmed by the Borgia.'

Machiavelli looked at his friend long and hard. 'Go then,' he said. 'Go and recruit our first novices.'

'Oh, I intend to,' said Ezio. 'And you will see that from the group of determined men and women I gather round us, I will forge a sword capable of cutting the limbs and head from the trunk of the Borgia – and of the Templars themselves.'

27

Ezio returned to the Assassin centre of operations on Tiber Island alone. He had done a good day's work, discreetly converting a number of disaffected citizens to his cause.

Apart from the loyal attendants who staffed and guarded the place, it was deserted, and Ezio looked forward to a little quiet time, to think and plan; but as he approached, he found he had a visitor. One who wanted to be quite sure that his presence would not be noted, and one who, therefore, waited until the general staff had gone about their business elsewhere in the building before he made himself known.

'Psst! Ezio! Over here!'

'Who's there?' Ezio was instantly alert, though he already thought he knew the voice. Tall bushes grew on either side of the lane that led to their headquarters, which was known to no one outside their organization. If by any chance the secret had been penetrated …

'Come here!'

'Who is it?'

'It's me!'

Leonardo da Vinci, dandified and distracted as ever, stepped out of his hiding place into the lane.

'Leo! My God!'

Ezio, remembering who Leonardo's new master was, checked his initial impulse, which had been to run and embrace his old friend.

His reaction registered with Leonardo, who looked a little older, to be sure, but who had lost none of his élan or vigorous enthusiasm. He took a step forward, but kept his head lowered. 'I'm not surprised you don't show that much enthusiasm at seeing me again.'

'Well, Leo, I must admit that you have disappointed me.'

Leonardo spread his hands. 'I knew you were behind the break-in at the Castel. It could only have been you. So I knew you were still alive.'

'Surely your new masters would have told you that?'

‘They tell me nothing. I am no more than a slave to them.’ There was the smallest twinkle in Leonardo’s eye. ‘But they have to trust me.’

‘As long as you deliver.’

‘I think I’m just about bright enough to stay one step ahead of them.’ Leonardo took another step towards Ezio, arms half held out. ‘It is good to see you again, my friend.’

‘You have designed weapons for them – new guns which we will find difficult to match.’

‘I know, but if you will let me explain …’

‘And how did you find this place?’

‘I can explain …’

Leonardo looked so contrite, and so unhappy, and he seemed so sincere that Ezio’s heart warmed, despite himself, towards his old friend. He also reflected that, after all, Leonardo had come to see him, no doubt at great personal risk; and that if he sought a rapprochement, it would be a foolish leader indeed who would turn down the friendship and the partnership of such a man.

‘Come here!’ cried Ezio, spreading his arms wide.

‘Oh, Ezio!’ Leonardo hurried forward and the two men embraced warmly.

Ezio led his friend into the Assassin headquarters, where they sat down together. Ezio knew that Caterina had been moved to an inner room, where she could complete her recovery in peace and quiet, and the doctor had given orders that she was not to be disturbed. He was tempted to disobey, but there would be time enough for talk with her later. Besides, Leonardo’s appearance dictated a change of priorities.

Ezio had wine and cakes brought for them.

‘Tell me everything,’ said Ezio.

‘I will explain. First of all, you must forgive me. The Borgia commandeered my services, but under duress. If I’d refused to serve them, they would have subjected me to a long and painful death. They described what they would do to me if I refused to help them. Even now I cannot think of it without trembling.’

‘You are perfectly safe now.’

Leonardo shook his head. ‘No! I must go back to them. I am of far more use to you if they think I am still working for them. As it is, I have done my utmost to create the minimum possible number of new inventions to satisfy them.’ Ezio was about to interrupt, but Leonardo held up a nervous hand. ‘Please, this is a kind of confession, and I’d like to complete it. Then you may judge me as you think fit.’

‘No one is judging you, Leonardo.’

Leonardo's manner became more intense. Ignoring the refreshments, he leant forward. 'I say I work for them under duress,' he went on, 'but it is more than that. You know I keep out of politics – I like to keep my nose clean – but men who seek power seek me out because they know what I can do for them.'

'This I do know.'

'I play along to stay alive. And why do I wish to stay alive? Because I have so much to *do*!' He took a breath. 'I cannot tell you, Ezio, how my poor brain teems!' He made a gesture that seemed partly all-embracing, partly despairing. 'There is so much to discover!'

Ezio was silent. This he also knew.

'So,' Leonardo concluded, 'now you know.'

'Why have you come here?'

'To make amends. I had to assure you that my heart is not with them.'

'And what do they want of you?'

'Whatever they can get. War machines are the main thing. They know what I am capable of.'

Leonardo produced a packet of papers, which he handed over. 'Here are some of the designs I've done for them. Look, here is an armoured vehicle capable, if correctly constructed, of moving across all terrains, and the men concealed within it can fire guns – big guns – while remaining fully protected from all assaults. I call it a tank.'

Ezio blenched as his eye scanned the drawings. 'And is it … under construction?'

Leonardo looked artful. 'I said, "If correctly constructed." Unfortunately, as the design stands, the thing is only able to swivel on its own axis.'

'I see,' Ezio smiled.

'And look at this.'

Ezio perused a drawing of a horseman managing two horses, harnessed side by side. Attached to their traces by long horizontal poles at front and rear, where there were also wheels, were rotating scythe-like devices, which could be used to cut down any enemy at which the horseman rode. 'A fiendish device,' he said.

'Yes, but unfortunately the horseman himself is … fully exposed.' Leonardo's eyes twinkled some more.

Ezio's smile broadened, then faded again. 'But what of the guns you have given them?'

Leonardo shrugged. 'One has to throw a sop to Cerberus,' he said. 'I have to give them something of actual use or they will grow suspicious.'

'But they are very efficient guns.'

‘Indeed they are, but they are not half as efficient as that little pistol I made for you once, years ago, based on the design from the Codex page. A pity really – I had trouble reining myself in on that one.’

Ezio thought sadly of his lost Codex weapons, but he would come back to them.

‘What else is in this packet of papers?’

Although they were alone, Leonardo lowered his voice. ‘I have copied the plans not only for the largest of the machines, but also for where they are to be used in battle.’ He spread his hands ironically. ‘Alas, that they should not be more efficient.’

Ezio looked at his old friend admiringly. This was the man who had designed a submarine for the Venetians to use against the Turkish galleys. If he had chosen not to build in defects to these designs, there would be no hope at all against the Borgia. How glad he was to have welcomed Leonardo as he had. This man was worth more than two armies.

‘For God’s sake, Leo, have a glass of wine at least. I know I can never reward you enough for all this.’

But Leonardo waved the proffered beaker away. ‘There is far graver news. You know they have the Apple?’

‘Of course.’

‘They have given it to me to study. You and I already know something of the extent of its powers. Rodrigo knows a little less, but he has more intellect than Cesare, though Cesare is the one to watch.’

‘How much information on the Apple have you given them?’

‘As little as possible, but I have to give them something. Fortunately, Cesare seems satisfied, so far, with the limited applications I have vouchsafed him. But Rodrigo knows there is more and grows impatient.’ He paused. ‘I had considered ways of stealing it, but it is kept under close guard and I am only allowed access to it under the strictest supervision. I was able to use its powers to locate you, though. It has that facility, you know. Quite fascinating.’

‘And you taught them that trick?’

‘Of course not! All I want is to return it to its rightful owner.’

‘Fear not, Leo. We will recover it. In the meantime, stall them as far as you can, and if you can, keep me posted on how much you have let them know.’

‘I will.’

Ezio paused. ‘There is something else.’

‘Tell me.’

‘I have lost all the Codex weapons you once fashioned for me.’

‘I see.’

‘Except for the original Hidden Blade. The pistol, the Poison Blade, the Double Blade, the miraculous Bracer – all these are gone.’

‘Hmm,’ said Leonardo. Then he smiled. ‘Well, re-creating them for you may not be a problem.’

‘Really?’ Ezio could scarcely believe it.

‘The designs you let me have are still in Florence, well hidden with my old assistants Agniolo and Innocento. The Borgia will never have them. If they ever took Florence – heaven forfend! – or even if the French did, Agniolo has strict orders to destroy them, and even he and Innocento – not that I do not trust them absolutely – would never be able to re-create them independently of me. But I … I never forget a design. However—’ He hesitated, almost embarrassed. ‘You must pay me for the raw materials I will need. In advance.’

Ezio was astonished. ‘Really? They are not paying you at *il Vaticano*?’

Leonardo coughed. ‘Very … very little. I suppose they think that keeping me alive is payment enough. And I am not such a fool as to think that the minute my services become … superfluous to requirements, they will not kill me with as little reflection as they might kill a dog.’

‘Hardly that,’ said Ezio. ‘They would rather you were dead than have you work for anyone else.’

‘Yes, I’ve been thinking along the same lines,’ said Leonardo. ‘And there’s really nowhere to run. Not that I want to. I want to see the Borgia crushed – I’ll engage myself so far in politics as to say that. But my beloved Milan is in French hands,’ he started to muse. ‘Perhaps … later, when all this is over … I might even try my luck in France. They say it’s a very civilized country …’

It was time to bring him back to reality. Ezio went to an iron-bound chest and from it produced a leather pouch, bulging with ducats. This he gave to Leonardo.

‘Payment on account for the Codex weapons,’ he said briskly. ‘When can you have them ready?’

Leonardo considered. ‘It won’t be as easy as it was last time,’ he said. ‘I must work secretly, and alone, for I cannot wholly trust all the assistants I have working for me here.’ He paused. ‘Let me contact you again. As soon as possible, I promise.’ He hefted the heavy bag in his hand. ‘And who knows, for this much money I may even be able to throw in a couple of new weapons – my own inventions this time, of course, but effective, I think you’ll find.’

‘Whatever you can do for us will earn my undying gratitude and my protection, wherever you are,’ said Ezio. He made a mental note to delegate a handful of his new recruits, as soon as they had finished their training, to keep a watchful eye on Leonardo and to report back regularly on him. ‘Now, how shall we maintain contact?’

Leonardo said, ‘I’ve thought of that.’ He took out a piece of chalk and, on the table between them, drew a man’s right hand, pointing.

‘It’s beautiful,’ said Ezio.

‘Thank you. It’s just a sketch of part of a painting I’ve been thinking of doing, of St John the Baptist. If I ever get round to it. Go and sit where it’s pointing to.’

Ezio obeyed.

‘That’s it,’ said Leonardo. ‘Tell your men to keep their eyes peeled. If they see one of these – it’ll just look like a bit of *graffiti* to anyone else – tell them to let you know, and follow the direction it’s pointing in. That’s how we’ll rendezvous.’

‘Splendid,’ said Ezio.

‘Don’t worry, I’ll make sure you’re forewarned. In case you’re thinking of charging off on some mission or other.’

‘Thanks.’

Leonardo stood. ‘I must go. Otherwise I’ll be missed. But first …’

‘First what?’

Leonardo grinned and shook the bag of money.

‘First, I’m going shopping.’

28

Ezio left the hideout shortly after Leonardo, to continue his recruiting work, but also to keep himself busy. He was impatient to have the replacement Codex weapons back in his hands.

When, later in the day, he returned for a prearranged meeting, it was to find that Machiavelli had preceded him. Caterina was with him, sitting in a chair, her knees covered with a fur rug. As usual, Machiavelli did not stand on ceremony.

'Where have you been?' he asked.

Ezio didn't like his tone. 'We all have our secrets,' he replied, keeping his voice level. 'And, may I ask, what have you been up to?'

Machiavelli smiled. 'I've been refining our carrier-pigeon system. We can use it now to send orders to the new recruits scattered about the city.'

'Excellent. Thank you, Niccolò.'

They looked at each other. Machiavelli was almost ten years Ezio's junior, yet there was no doubting the independence and ambition behind those veiled eyes. Did he resent Ezio's leadership? Had he hoped it might have fallen on him? Ezio put the thought aside – surely the man was more of a theorist, a diplomat, a political animal. And there could be no doubt about his usefulness – or his allegiance – to the Brotherhood. If only Ezio could fully convince La Volpe of that.

As if on cue, La Volpe entered the hideout, accompanied by Claudia.

'What news?' Ezio asked him after the two had greeted one another.

'Bartolomeo sends his apologies. It seems that General Octavien has had another stab at attacking the barracks.'

'I see.'

'They redoubled their assault, but we are holding our ground.'

'Good.' Ezio turned to his sister, coldly. 'Claudia,' he said, inclining his head.

'Brother,' she rejoined with equal frostiness.

'Please sit down, all of you,' said Ezio.

Once they were settled, he continued. 'I have a plan prepared for the Borgia.'

'I suggest', Machiavelli put in immediately, 'that we go either after their supplies or after Cesare's followers.'

‘Thank you, Niccolò,’ said Ezio evenly. ‘*My* plan is to attack both. If we can cut off his funds, Cesare will lose his army and return without his men. How does he get his money?’

La Volpe said, ‘We know that he depends on Rodrigo for much of his money, and Rodrigo’s banker is Agostino Chigi. But Cesare also has his own banker, whose identity has yet to be confirmed, though we have our suspicions.’

Ezio decided, for the moment, to keep his own thoughts in that direction quiet. It would be best to have them confirmed, if possible, by La Volpe’s men.

‘I know someone – a client of ours at The Rosa in Fiore – who owes that banker money. The senator Egidio Troche is complaining about interest rates all the time.’

‘*Bene*,’ said Ezio. ‘Then we must follow that up.’

‘There’s something else,’ said Machiavelli. ‘We have news that they are planning to station French troops on the road that leads to Castel Sant’Angelo. Your attack must have really rattled them. And apparently Cesare is planning to return to Rome. Immediately. Quite why so soon is beyond me, but we’ll find out. In any case, when he does arrive, he’ll be so well guarded that you’ll never get to him. Our spies tell us that he intends to keep his return secret, at least for the moment.’

‘He’s got something up his sleeve,’ said La Volpe.

‘Brilliant,’ said Machiavelli, and the two men exchanged a look that wasn’t friendly.

Ezio considered this. ‘Our best course of action would seem to be to corner this French general of theirs, Octavien, and kill him. Once he’s out of the way, Bartolomeo will have the Frenchmen on the defensive, and they’ll abandon their guard duty at the Castel.’

Caterina spoke for the first time: ‘Even with those troops gone, Ezio, the Papal Guard will continue to protect the bridge and the main gate.’

‘Ah,’ said La Volpe, ‘but there’s a side entrance. Lucrezia’s latest plaything, the actor Pietro Benintendi, has a key.’

‘Does he?’ said Ezio. ‘I saw him with her at the Castel.’

‘I’ll have my men find out where he is,’ promised La Volpe. Shouldn’t be too difficult.’

Caterina smiled. ‘Sounds like a good idea. I’d like to help. We should be able to scare that key out of him – and he’ll stop seeing Lucrezia. Anything to rob that bitch of any pleasure.’

‘*Momentino, Contessa*,’ said Machiavelli. ‘We are going to have to do without your help.’

Caterina looked at him, surprised. ‘Why?’

‘Because we are going to have to get you out of the city – maybe to Florence – until we can get Forlì back for you. Your children are already safe there.’ He looked around. ‘Ezio’s rescuing you wasn’t without its consequences. There are heralds all over the city, proclaiming a rich reward for the *Contessa’s* capture – alive or dead. And no bribe can shut them up.’

There was silence. Then Caterina rose, letting the rug fall to the floor. ‘Then it appears that I have outstayed my welcome,’ she said. ‘Excuse me.’

‘What are you talking about?’ said Ezio, alarmed.

‘Only that I am in danger here—’

‘We will protect you!’

‘And – more importantly – a liability to you.’ She was looking at Machiavelli as she spoke. ‘Isn’t that so, Niccolò?’

Machiavelli was silent.

‘I am answered,’ said Caterina. ‘I will make my preparations at once.’

29

‘Are you sure you’re able to ride?’ Ezio asked her.

‘I rode from the Castel when you rescued me, didn’t I?’

‘Yes, but then there was no choice.’

‘Is there a choice now?’

Ezio was silent. It was the following morning and Ezio watched as Caterina and her two female attendants packed the few clothes and provisions Claudia had organized for her journey. She would leave the next day before dawn. A small escort of Ezio’s men would ride with her part of the way, to see her safely out of Rome. Ezio had offered to join them, but this Caterina had refused. ‘I don’t like goodbyes,’ she’d said. ‘And the more drawn-out they are, the worse they are.’

He watched her as she bustled about her packing. He thought about the times they had had together, long ago in Forlì, and then about what he had fondly imagined was a reunion in Monteriggioni. The Assassin Brotherhood seemed to have taken over his life – and left him solitary.

‘I wish you would stay,’ he said.

‘Ezio, I can’t. You know I can’t.’

‘Dismiss your women.’

‘I have to hurry.’

‘Dismiss them. This won’t take long.’

She did so, but he could see with what reluctance, and even then she said, ‘Be sure to return in five minutes by the water clock.’

Once they were alone, he didn’t know where to begin.

‘Well?’ she said, more gently, and he could see that her eyes were troubled, though by what, he could not tell.

‘I … I rescued you,’ he said lamely.

‘You did, and I am grateful. But didn’t you tell the others that you did so purely because I am still a useful ally – even with Forlì gone?’

‘We’ll get Forlì back.’

‘And then I shall go there again.’

Ezio was silent again. His heart felt empty.

She came up to him and put her hands on his shoulders. ‘Ezio, listen. I am no use to anyone without Forlì. If I leave now, it is to seek safety and to be with my children. Don’t you want that for me?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, then …’

‘I didn’t rescue you because you’re valuable to the cause.’

It was her turn to be silent.

‘But because—’

‘Don’t say it, Ezio.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because I cannot say it back.’

No weapon could have cut him more deeply than those words. ‘You used me then?’

‘That sounds rather harsh.’

‘What other words would you wish me to use?’

‘I tried to explain earlier.’

‘You are a ruthless woman.’

‘I am a woman with work to do, and a duty.’

‘Then whatever serves your cause, goes.’

She was silent again, then said, ‘I’ve tried to explain this to you already. You must accept it.’ She had taken her hands from his shoulders. He could see that her mind had wandered back to her journey and that she was looking at the things yet to be packed.

He thought, recklessly, *To hell with the Brotherhood! I know what I want! Why shouldn’t I live for myself, for a change?*

‘I’m coming with you,’ he said.

She turned to him again, her eyes serious. ‘Listen, Ezio. Perhaps you are making a choice, but you are making it too late. Perhaps I have done the same thing. But you are leader of the Assassins now. Don’t give up the work you have started, the great work of rebuilding after the disaster at Monteriggioni. Without you, things will fall apart again, and then who will there be to save us?’

‘But you never really wanted me.’

He looked at her. She was still there, in the room with him, but her spirit had long gone. How long ago it had left him, he did not know – perhaps it had never really been there. Perhaps he had only hoped for it, or imagined it. At that moment, he felt that he was looking at the corpse of love, yet still he refused to believe in its death. But like any other death, he saw that he had no choice but to get used to the reality.

There was a knock at the door.

‘Come in,’ said Caterina, and her attendants returned.

Ezio left them to their packing.

The next morning, Ezio was determined to resist seeing Caterina off, but he could not. It was cold, and when he got to the appointed square, in a safe district of the city, they were already mounted, the horses restless. Perhaps, even now, at the last moment, she would relent. But her eyes, though kind, were distant. He thought he could have borne things better if she hadn’t looked at him with kindness. Kindness was almost humiliating.

All he could say was, ‘*Buona fortuna, Contessa*, and … farewell.’

‘Let’s hope it’s not “farewell”.’

‘Oh, I think it is.’

She looked at him once more. ‘Well then – *buona fortuna anche*, my Prince; and – *Vittoria agli Assassini!*’

She wheeled her horse round and, without another word or even a backward glance, at the head of her guardian entourage, she galloped north out of the city and out of his life. He watched them until they were mere specks in the distance, a lonely, middle-aged man who had been given a last chance at love, and missed it.

‘*Vittoria agli Assassini*,’ murmured Ezio tonelessly to himself, as he turned and made his way back into the still-sleeping city.

30

With Cesare's return imminent, Ezio had to put his private grief aside and get on with the work Fate had given him. In his attempt to cut Cesare off from his funds, the first step was to find and neutralize Cesare's banker, and the initial lead as to who that was would come from The Rosa in Fiore.

'What do you want?' Claudia couldn't have been less friendly if she'd tried.

'You spoke of a senator at the meeting.'

'Yes I did. Why?'

'You said he owed money to Cesare's banker. Is he here?'

She shrugged. 'You'll probably find him on the Campidoglio. Surely you don't need my help for that?'

'What does he look like?'

'Oh, let me see, average?'

'Don't play games with me, Sister.'

Claudia relented slightly. 'He's maybe sixty, lean, worried-looking, clean-shaven, grey hair, your height or a little less. Name's Egidio Troche. Stubborn type, Ezio, pessimistic, set in his ways. You'll have your work cut out trying to get round him.'

'Thank you.' Ezio looked at her hard. 'Now, I intend to track down this banker and kill him. I've a pretty shrewd idea who he is, but I need to find out where he lives. This senator could lead me to him.'

'The banker's security's pretty tight. So would yours be, if you were in a position like his.'

'You think mine isn't?'

'As if I cared.'

'Listen, Claudia, if I'm tough with you, it's because I worry about you.'

'Spare me.'

'You're doing well—'

'Thank you, kind sir—'

'But I need you to organize a big job for me. Once I have neutralized this banker, I need your girls to get his money to a place of safety.'

'Just let me know when – or should I say "if" – you succeed.'

‘Just stay alert.’

In a dark mood, Ezio set off for the Capitoline Hill, the administrative centre of Rome, where he was greeted by a busy scene. There were several senators going about their business in the broad piazza around which the government buildings were arranged, accompanied by secretaries and assistants, who carried papers in leather folders and bustled after their masters as they moved from building to building, all of them trying to look as busy and important as possible. As far as he could, Ezio blended into the melee, keeping a watchful eye out for a man answering the description Claudia had given him. As he moved through the crowd, he kept his ears pricked for any hint he might pick up about his quarry. There was certainly no sign of Egidio among the senators at the moment, though he seemed to be providing his colleagues with a lively topic of conversation.

‘Egidio’s been asking for money again,’ said one.

‘When doesn’t he? What’s it for this time?’

‘Oh, some proposal to reduce the number of public executions.’

‘Ridiculous!’

Ezio moved on to another knot of senators, and there he gleaned more information. He wasn’t sure, from what he heard, whether Egidio was a militant (and therefore foolish) liberal reformer, or a rather ham-fisted conman.

‘Egidio’s petitioning for an end to the torturing of witnesses in the criminal courts,’ the leading member of the next group was saying.

‘Fat chance!’ replied the harassed-looking man he was talking to. ‘It’s just a front, anyway. All he really wants the money for is to pay off his debts.’

‘And he wants to get rid of exemption licences.’

‘Please! Like that’s going to happen. Every citizen who feels mistreated by our laws should surely be permitted to pay for an exemption from those laws. It’s our duty. After all, it’s our own Holy Father who brought the exemption licences in, and he’s following the example of Christ Himself – “Blessed are the Merciful”!’

Another Borgia scam for making money, thought Ezio, while the other senator rejoined, ‘Why should we give any money to Egidio? Everyone knows what he’d do with it.’

The two men laughed and went about their business.

Ezio’s attention was then attracted by a small group of Borgia guards who had Cesare’s personal crest – two red bulls, quartered with fleurs-de-lys – sewn onto their doublets. As this always spelt trouble, he made his way over to them and saw, as he approached, that they had surrounded one of the senators. The others were carrying on as if nothing out of the ordinary was happening, but Ezio could see that they left plenty of space between the guards and themselves.

The unfortunate senator answered Claudia's description perfectly.

'No more arguing,' the guards' sergeant was saying.

'Your payment's due,' added his corporal. 'And a debt's a debt.'

Egidio had dropped any pretence of dignity and was pleading. 'Make an exception for an old man,' he quavered. 'I beg of you.'

'No,' snarled the sergeant, nodding to two of his men, who seized Egidio and threw him to the ground. 'The banker has sent us to collect, and you know what that means.'

'Look, give me until tomorrow – this evening! – I'll have the money ready then.'

'Not good enough,' responded the sergeant, kicking the senator hard in the stomach. He stepped back and the corporal and the other two guards set about belabouring the prostrate old man.

'That won't get you your money,' said Ezio, stepping forward.

'Who are you? Friend of his?'

'I'm a concerned bystander.'

'Well, you can take your concern and mind your own fucking business!'

The sergeant, as Ezio had hoped, stepped too close, and with practised ease Ezio slipped the catch on his Hidden Blade and, raising his arm, swept it across the guard's exposed throat, just above the gorget he was wearing. The other guards watched, rooted to the spot in astonishment as their leader fell to his knees, his hands futilely scrabbling at the wound to staunch the fountain of blood. Before they could react, Ezio was upon them, and a matter of seconds later, the three of them had joined their sergeant on the Other Side, all three with their throats slit. Ezio's mission left no time for sword play, only swift, efficient killing.

During the skirmish the piazza emptied as if by magic. Ezio helped the senator to his feet. There was blood on the man's clothes and he looked – and indeed was – in a state of shock mingled with relief.

'We'd better get out of here,' Ezio said to him.

'I know a place. Follow me,' Egidio replied, and set off with remarkable speed for an alleyway between two of the larger government buildings. They hastened down it, turned left, then down some stairs into a basement area which contained a door. This the senator hastily unlocked, ushering Ezio into a small, dark, but comfortable-looking apartment.

'My bolthole,' said Egidio. 'Useful when you have as many creditors as I have.

'But one big one.'

‘My mistake was to consolidate all my debts with the banker. I wasn’t fully aware of his exact connections at the time. I should have stuck to Chigi. At least he’s honest – as far as a banker can be!’ Egidio paused. ‘But what of you? A Good Samaritan in Rome? I thought they were a dying breed.’

Ezio let that go. ‘You are *Senatore* Egidio Troche?’

Egidio looked startled. ‘Don’t tell me I owe you money as well?!’

‘No, but you can help me. I am looking for Cesare’s banker.’

The senator smiled thinly. ‘Cesare *Borgia’s* banker? Ha! And you are?’

‘Just let’s say I’m a friend of the family.’

‘Cesare has a lot of friends these days. Unfortunately, I am not one of them. So, if you’ll excuse me, I have some packing to do.’

‘I can pay.’

Egidio stopped looking nervous. ‘Ah! You can *pay*? *Ma che meraviglia!* He fights off guards for one *and* he offers one money! Tell me, where have you been all my life?’

‘Well, I haven’t descended from heaven. You help me and I’ll help you. It’s as simple as that.’

Egidio considered this. ‘We’ll go to my brother’s place. They’ve got no quarrel with him, and we can’t stay here – it’s too depressing, and it’s far too close to my – dare I say, our? – enemies.’

‘Let’s go, then.’

‘But you’ll have to protect me. There’ll be more of Cesare’s guards out after me, and they won’t be especially friendly, if you know what I mean – especially after that little show you put on in the piazza.’

‘Come on.’

Egidio led the way out cautiously, making sure the coast was clear before they set off by a labyrinthine route through back alleys and seedy lanes, across little *piazze*, and skirting the edges of markets. Twice they encountered pairs of guards, and twice Ezio had to fight them off, this time using his sword to full effect. It seemed that the city was on full alert for both men – and both men in flight together proved too good a bounty for the Borgia henchmen. Time was not on Ezio’s side, so when the next pair of guards appeared at the far side of a small piazza, they simply had to run for it, and Ezio, unable to take to the rooftops with the senator in tow, had to depend on Egidio’s apparently exhaustive knowledge of Rome’s backstreets. At last they reached the back of a new and quietly splendid villa, set in its own walled courtyard, a few blocks east of St Peter’s. Egidio let them into the courtyard through a small iron-bound gate set into one of the walls, for which he produced a key.

Once inside, they both breathed more easily.

‘Someone really wants you dead,’ said Ezio.

‘Not yet – they want me to pay them first.’

‘Why only once they’ve got their money? By the sound of things you’re something of a milch cow to them.’

‘It isn’t that simple. The fact is, I’ve been a fool. I’m no friend of the Borgia, even if I have borrowed money from them, and recently a bit of information came my way, which gave me an opportunity to do them down – if only a little.’

‘And that was?’

‘A few months ago, my brother Francesco, who’s Cesare’s chamberlain – I know, I know, don’t get me started – told me a good deal about Cesare’s plans for the Romagna. He plans to create a mini-kingdom there, from which he intends to conquer the rest of the country and bring it to heel. As the Romagna is on the doorstep of the Venetian territories, Venice is already unhappy about Cesare’s inroads there.’

‘So what did you do?’

Egidio spread his hands. ‘I wrote to the Venetian ambassador, giving him all the information I’d got from Francesco. Warning him. But one of my letters must have been intercepted.’

‘Won’t that implicate your brother?’

‘He’s managed to keep himself in the clear so far.’

‘But what possessed you to do such a thing?’

‘I had to do something. The Senate has nothing to do, really, these days, except put its imprimatur on all the Borgia decrees. If it didn’t, it would cease to exist altogether. As it is, there’s no independence. Do you know what it’s like not to have *un cazzo* to do?’ Egidio shook his head. ‘It changes a man. I admit that even I have taken to gambling and drinking …’

‘And whoring.’

The senator looked at him. ‘Oh, you’re good. You’re very good. What was it that gave me away? The scent of perfume on my sleeve?’

Ezio smiled. ‘Something like that.’

‘Hmm. Well, anyway, as I was saying, senators used to do what senators are supposed to do: petitioning about real issues, like – oh, I don’t know where to start – unlawful cruelty, abandoned children, street crime, lending rates, keeping some kind of rein on Chigi and the other bankers. Now, the only legislation we are allowed to draw up independently concerns stuff like the appropriate width of the sleeves of women’s dresses.’

‘But not you. You try to raise money for false causes in order to pay off your gambling debts.’

‘They’re not false causes, my boy. As soon as we have a proper government again, and as soon as I am on an even keel financially, I intend to pursue them vigorously.’

‘And when do you think that will be?’

‘We must be patient. Tyranny is unbearable, but it never lasts. It’s too brittle.’

‘I wish I could believe that.’

‘Of course you’ve got to stand up to it, whatever happens. You obviously have to.’ He paused. ‘I’m probably – what? – ten or fifteen years older than you. I must make the most of my time. Or have you never looked at a grave and thought, *This is the most significant thing I will ever do: die?*’

Ezio was silent.

‘No,’ continued Egidio. ‘I guess not.’ He turned in on himself. ‘*Maledette* letters! I should never have sent them to the ambassador. Now Cesare will kill me as soon as he gets a chance, debt or no debt, unless by some miracle he decides to vent his anger on someone else. God knows, he’s capricious enough.’

‘Someone else? Like your brother?’

‘I’d never forgive myself.’

‘Why not? You’re a politician.’

‘We’re not all bad.’

‘Where is your brother?’

‘I’ve no idea. Not here, thank God. We haven’t talked since he found out about the letters, and I’m enough of a liability for him. If he saw you …’

‘Can we get down to business?’ said Ezio.

‘Of course. One good turn, and so on … Now, what was it you wanted again?’

‘I want to know where Cesare’s banker is. Where he works. Where he lives.’

Egidio was suddenly all briskness. ‘Right, I need to arrive with the money.’ He spread his hands again. ‘Problem is, I have none.’

‘I told you I’d get it for you. Just tell me how much, and where you are meeting this banker.’

‘I never know until I’m actually there. I usually go to one of three prearranged points. His associates meet me and take me to him. I owe ten thousand ducats.’

‘No problem.’

‘*Sul serio*?’ Egidio almost beamed. ‘You have to stop this. You might actually give me hope.’

‘Stay here. I’ll return with the money at sunset.’

Early in the evening, Ezio returned to an increasingly incredulous Egidio. He placed two heavy leather bags in the senator’s hands.

‘You came back! You actually came back!’

‘You waited.’

‘I’m a desperate man. I cannot believe you would just … do this.’

‘There is a condition.’

‘I knew it.’

‘Listen,’ Ezio said. ‘If you survive, and I hope you will, I want you to keep an eye on what’s going on politically in this city. And I want you to report everything you find to …’ He hesitated, then said, ‘To *Madonna* Claudia, at the bordello they call The Rosa in Fiore. Especially anything you can pick up on the Borgia.’ Ezio smiled inwardly. ‘Do you know the place?’

Egidio coughed. ‘I … I have a friend who sometimes frequents it.’

‘Good.’

‘What will you do with this information? Make the Borgia disappear?’

Ezio grinned. ‘I’m just … recruiting you.’

The senator looked at the bags of money. ‘I hate to give this to them.’ He fell into a thoughtful silence, then said, ‘My brother has watched my back because we’re family. I hate the *pezzo di merda*, but he is still my brother.’

‘He works for Cesare.’

Egidio pulled himself together. ‘*Va bene*. They sent me word of the meeting place this afternoon while you were gone. The timing’s perfect. They’re impatient for their money, so the meeting’s tonight. I sweated blood, you know, when I told their messenger that I’d be sure to have their money ready for them.’ He paused again. ‘We should go soon. What will you do? Follow me?’

‘It wouldn’t look good if you didn’t seem to be alone.’

Egidio nodded. ‘Good. Just time for a glass of wine before we set off then. Will you join me?’

‘No.’

‘Well, I certainly need one.’

31

Ezio followed the senator through another maze of streets, though as these led to the Tiber, they were more familiar to him. They passed monuments, squares and fountains that were all familiar to him, as well as building works – the Borgia spent lavishly on *palazzi*, theatres and galleries in their quest for self-aggrandisement. At last Egidio halted in an attractive square formed by large private houses on two sides and a row of expensive shops on a third. On the fourth was a well-tended little park that sloped down towards the river. This was Egidio's destination. He selected a stone bench and took up a position by it in the gathering gloom, looking left and right, but apparently unruffled. Ezio admired his poise, and it was also useful. Any sign of nervousness might have put the banker's minions on their guard.

Ezio took up position by a cedar tree and waited. He didn't have to wait long. Minutes after Egidio's arrival, a tall man dressed in a livery he did not recognize came up to him. A badge on his shoulder displayed a crest; one half showed a red bull in a golden field, while the other had broad black and gold horizontal stripes. Ezio was none the wiser for this.

'Good evening, Egidio,' the newcomer said. 'It seems that you are ready to die like a gentleman.'

'That's hardly friendly of you, *Capitano*,' replied Egidio, 'as I have the money.'

The man raised an eyebrow. 'Really? Well, that makes all the difference. The banker will be most pleased. You came alone, I trust?'

'Do you see anyone else here?'

'Just follow me, *furbacchione*.'

They moved off, retracing their steps eastwards, and crossed the Tiber. Ezio followed them at a discreet distance, but staying within earshot.

'Is there any news of my brother, *Capitano*?' asked Egidio as they walked.

'I can only tell you that Duke Cesare wishes very much to interview him. As soon as he returns from the Romagna, that is.'

'I hope he's all right?'

'If he has nothing to hide, he has nothing to fear.'

They continued in silence, and at the Church of Santa Maria sopra Minerva turned north, in the direction of the Pantheon.

'What'll happen to my money?' said Egidio. Ezio realized that he was pumping the captain for Ezio's benefit. Clever man.

'*Your* money?' The Captain snickered. 'I hope all the interest's there.'

'It is.'

'It had better be.'

'Well?'

'The banker likes to be generous to his friends. He treats them well. He can afford to.'

'Treat you well, does he?'

'I like to think so.'

'How generous he is,' observed Egidio, with such heavy sarcasm that even the captain caught it.

'What did you say?' he asked threateningly, breaking his stride.

'Oh … nothing.'

'Come on, we're there.'

The great bulk of the Pantheon rose out of the gloom in its cramped piazza. The tall Corinthian portico of the 1500-year-old building, constructed as a temple to all the Roman gods, but long since consecrated as a church, towered above them. In its shadow three men were waiting. Two were dressed similarly to the captain, while the third was in civilian dress: a dry, tall, withered-looking man, whose fine robes sat ill on him. They greeted the captain, and the civilian nodded coldly at Egidio.

'Luigi! Luigi Torcelli!' said Egidio loudly, again for Ezio's benefit. 'It's good to see you again. Still the banker's agent, I see. Thought you'd have been promoted by now. Desk job and all that.'

'Shut up,' said the withered man.

'He's got the money,' said the captain.

Torcelli's eyes glittered. 'Well, well! That *will* put my master in a good mood. He's having a rather special party this evening, so I'm delivering your payment to him personally, at his palazzo. I must hurry – time is money – so give it here.'

Egidio clearly hated to comply, but the two underling guards levelled their halberds at him and he handed over the bags. 'Oof!' he said. 'It's heavy. Glad to get shot of them.'

'Shut up,' snapped the agent once again. To the guards he said, 'Hold him here until I get back.'

With that, he disappeared inside the cavernous, deserted church, closing its mighty doors firmly behind him.

Ezio needed to follow him, but there was no way he'd get through those doors, and, anyway, first he had to get past the guards undetected. Egidio must have guessed this, for he started up a line of banter with the men in uniform, irritating them, but also distracting them.

'Why not release me? I've paid up,' he said indignantly.

'What if you've sold us short?' replied the captain. 'The money has to be counted first. You must see that.'

'What? Ten thousand ducats? It'll take all night!'

'It has to be done.'

'If Luigi's late, he'll get stick. I can imagine the kind of man the banker must be!'

'Shut *up*.'

'You people certainly have a very limited vocabulary. Look, think of poor old Torcelli – if he doesn't show up with the money soon, the banker probably won't let him join in the fun. *Does* he let his lackeys join in the fun?'

The captain cuffed the senator impatiently round the head and Egidio fell silent, though he was still grinning. He'd seen Ezio slip past and begin to climb the façade of the building in the direction of the dome behind it.

Once on the roof of the circular edifice, which the classical frontage partially concealed, Ezio made his way towards the round opening – the oculus – he knew was at its centre. It would be a test of all his climbing skills, but, once inside, he would find the agent and put the next phase of the plan, which was rapidly forming in his mind, into operation. The agent was about his size and, though far less muscular, his flowing robes would hide Ezio's physique, if all went well.

The trickiest part was lowering himself through the aperture at the dome's apex, then finding some way of descending from there. He'd been to the church before, and knew that censers hanging far below were suspended by chains from this very roof. If he could reach one of them … If it would take his weight …

Well, there was no other way. Ezio knew full well that even he couldn't climb, fly-like, across the inner curve of a dome, coffered though it was, that hung 140 feet above the cold grey flagstone floor.

He hung over the edge of the oculus and peered into the gloom beneath. A pinpoint of light far below showed where the agent was, seated on a bench that ran round the edge of the wall. He'd have the money next to him and would be counting it by candlelight. Next, Ezio looked round for the chains that held the censers. None was within reach, but if he could just …

He changed position and lowered his legs over the edge of the circular opening, gripping it with both hands. It was a huge risk, but the chains looked

solid and old, and far heavier than he'd expected. He looked at their fixings in the ceiling, and as far as he could see they were set fast in solid stone.

There was nothing for it. Pushing hard with his hands, he threw himself forwards and sideways into the void.

For a moment it seemed he was suspended in the air, as if the air was holding him up, as water does a swimmer, but then he started to fall.

His arms flailed forward and he willed his body towards the nearest chain – and caught it. The links slipped under his gloves and he slid several feet before he was able to get a firm grip, then he found himself swaying gently in the darkness. He listened. He had heard no sound, and it was too dark for the agent to see the chain swinging from where he sat far below. Ezio looked towards the light. It still burned steadily and there were no calls of alarm.

Steadily, he lowered himself down until he was perhaps twenty feet above the floor. He was quite close to the agent, and could see his silhouette hunched over the money bags, the gold coins glinting in the candlelight. Ezio could hear the man muttering, and the gentle, rhythmic click of an abacus.

Suddenly, there was an awful, tearing sound from above. The fixing of the chain in the roof could bear the strain of his extra weight no longer, and had ripped loose. Ezio let go of the chain as it went loose in his hands and threw himself forward towards the candle. As he sailed through the air, he heard a startled, 'Who's there?' from the agent, and a seemingly unending rattle as 140 feet of chain fell snaking to the floor. Thank God the church doors were closed: their thickness would deaden any sound from within.

Ezio fell upon the agent with his full weight, knocking the breath out of him, and both men sprawled on the floor, the agent spreadeagled beneath Ezio.

He wriggled free, but Ezio had him by the arm.

'Who are you? Christ protect me!' said the agent, terrified.

'I am sorry, friend,' said Ezio, releasing the Hidden Blade.

'What? No! No!' the agent jabbered. 'Look, take the money! It's yours! It's *yours*!'

Ezio adjusted his grip and drew the man close.

'Get away from me!'

'*Requiescat in Pace*,' said Ezio.

Ezio quickly stripped the agent of his outer robes and put them on over his own, drawing a scarf over his lower face and tipping the agent's hat down low. The robes were a little snug, but they weren't a noticeably bad fit. Then he finished transferring the money from the bags into the metal box the agent had brought for the purpose, and where much of it was already neatly stacked. To it he added

the account book and, abandoning the abacus and the leather bags, he tucked the heavy box under his arm and made for the door. He had heard enough of the agent's manner of speech to be able to emulate it tolerably, he hoped. Anyway, he'd have to chance it.

As he approached the door, it opened and the captain called through it, 'Everything going well in there?'

'Just done.'

'Well, hurry up, Luigi, or we'll be late.'

Ezio emerged into the portico.

'The count is complete?'

Ezio nodded.

'*Va bene*,' said the captain. Then, turning to the men who held Egidio, he crisply ordered, 'Kill him.'

'Wait!' said Ezio.

'What?'

'Don't kill him.'

The captain looked surprised. 'But that's … that's hardly usual procedure, is it, Luigi? Besides, do you know what this guy's *done*?'

'I have my orders – from the banker himself – this man is to be spared.'

'May I ask why?'

'Do you question the commands of the banker?'

The captain shrugged and nodded to the guards, who let go their hold of the senator.

'Lucky you,' he said to Egidio, who had the sense not to glance at Ezio before hastening off without another word.

The captain turned to Ezio. 'All right, Luigi. Lead the way.'

Ezio hesitated. He was stumped, as he had no idea where to go. He hefted the box. 'This is heavy. Have the guards carry it between them.'

'Certainly.'

He passed the box over but still didn't move.

The guards waited.

'*Ser* Luigi,' said the captain after a few moments. 'With respect, we must get this to the banker on time. Of course, I am not questioning your authority … but should we not hurry?'

What was the point of buying time to think? Ezio knew he'd have to work on a hunch. It was likely that the banker would live somewhere in the vicinity of either the Castel Sant'Angelo or the Vatican. But which? He plumped for the Castel Sant'Angelo, and started off in a westerly direction. His security detail looked at one another, but followed him. Even so, he sensed their disquiet, and

indeed, after they had gone a little way, he heard the two guardsmen whispering, ‘Is this some kind of test?’

‘Not sure.’

‘Perhaps we’re too early?’

‘Maybe we’re taking a roundabout route deliberately – for some reason.’

Finally the captain tapped him on the shoulder and said, ‘Luigi, are you all right?’

‘Of course I am.’

‘Then – again with respect – why are you taking us towards the Tiber?’

‘Security reasons.’

‘Ah – I did wonder. Normally we just go straight there.’

‘This is a particularly important consignment,’ said Ezio, hoping it was. The captain didn’t bat an eyelid.

While they had stopped to talk, one of the guards muttered to the other, ‘Load of rubbish, if you ask me. This kind of arsing about makes me wish I were still a blacksmith.’

‘I’m starving. I want to go home,’ muttered the other. ‘Stuff the security. It’s only a couple of blocks north of here.’

On hearing this, Ezio breathed a sigh of relief, for his mind had flashed on the location of the palazzo of the other banker, Agostino Chigi, who dealt with the Pope’s affairs. That was a little to the north-east of where they were now. It stood to reason that Cesare’s banker’s place would not be far away – in the financial district. What a fool he’d been not to think of that before, but it had been another busy day.

‘We’ve made enough of a detour,’ he said decisively. ‘We’ll take a direct route from here.’

He set off towards the Palazzo Chigi, and was reassured by the sense of relief he got from his companions. After a while, the captain even decided to take the lead. They adopted a brisk pace and soon reached a district of clean, broad streets. The large well-lit marble edifice they headed for had different guards on duty at the foot of its entrance steps and in front of the imposing double front door at their head.

Evidently, Ezio’s party was expected.

‘Not before time,’ said the leader of the new guards, who clearly outranked the captain. Turning to Ezio, he added, ‘Hand over the box to my men, Luigi. I’ll see the banker gets it. You’d better come, too. There’s someone here who wants to talk to you.’ He looked round. ‘Where’s Senator Troche?’

‘Dealt with as ordered,’ said Ezio quickly before anyone else could answer.

‘Good,’ replied the guard leader gruffly.

Ezio followed the box, which was now in the hands of the new guards, up the steps. Behind him, the captain made to follow.

‘Not you,’ said the guard leader.

‘We can’t go in?’

‘Not tonight. You and your men are to join the patrol here. And you might send one of them to fetch another detachment. We’re on full security. Orders of Duke Cesare.’

‘*Porco puttana*,’ growled one of Ezio’s guards to his mate.

Ezio pricked up his ears. *Cesare? He’s here?* he thought to himself, his mind racing as he went through the open doors into an entrance hall ablaze with light and, luckily, thronged with people.

The captain and the guard leader were still arguing about the extra patrol duty when a detachment of Papal city police came up to them on the double. They were out of breath and concern showed on their faces.

‘What is it, sergeant?’ the guard leader said to their commander.

‘*Perdone, Colonnello*, but we’ve just been on the beat near the Pantheon – the doors were open …’

‘And?’

‘So we investigated. I sent some men in …’

‘Spit it out, man.’

‘We found *Messer* Torcelli, sir. Murdered.’

‘Luigi?’ The guard leader turned to look up at the front door through which Ezio had just disappeared. ‘Nonsense. He arrived here a few minutes ago, with the money. There must be some mistake.’

32

Ezio, after having quickly and discreetly divested himself of Luigi's outer garments and hidden them behind a column, made his way through the crowd of richly attired guests, many of whom wore masks, keeping a close eye on the guards with the box of money. He drew nearer to them as they approached an attendant in fine livery, to whom they handed it.

'For the banker,' said one of the guards.

The attendant nodded and, carrying the box with ease, turned to make his way towards the back of the hall. Ezio was about to follow when he was joined by three girls who brushed against him. Their dress was as opulent as that of the other guests, but their décolleté left little to the imagination. With a shock of surprise and pleasure, Ezio recognized them as courtesans from The Rosa in Fiore. He'd obviously underestimated his sister. No wonder she was so furious with him.

'We'll take over from here, Ezio,' said one of the girls.

'It wouldn't do for you to get too close,' said a second. 'But keep us in sight.'

They swanned off after the attendant and soon caught up with him, at which point one of them engaged him in conversation.

'Hi there,' she said.

'Hello,' replied the man guardedly. But it wasn't much fun being at such a party and yet having to be on duty.

'Mind if I walk with you? All these people! It's hard to get through them with any speed.'

'Sure. I mean, I don't mind if you want to keep me company.'

'I've never been here before.'

'Where did you come from?'

'Trastevere.' She shuddered theatrically. 'You have to pass some of the old ruins to get here. They make me nervous.'

'You're safe here.'

'With you, you mean?'

The attendant smiled. 'I could protect you, if the need arose.'

‘I bet you could.’ She looked at the box. ‘My, what a fine chest you have there.’

‘It isn’t mine.’

‘Oh, but you’re holding it in those strong arms of yours. What muscles you must have.’

‘Want to touch them?’

‘*Santò cielo!* But what would I tell the priest in Confession?’

By now they had arrived at an iron-bound door flanked by two guards. Ezio watched as one of them knocked. A moment later, the door was opened and a figure in the red robes of a cardinal appeared in the entrance, with an attendant similarly dressed to the first.

‘Here is the money you were expecting, Your Eminence,’ said the first attendant, handing the box to the second.

Ezio drew in his breath, his thoughts had been confirmed. The banker was none other than Juan Borgia the Elder, Archbishop of Monreale and Cardinal-Priest of Santa Susanna. The selfsame man he had seen in Cesare’s company at Monteriggioni and in the stable yard at the Castel Sant’Angelo!

‘Good,’ said the banker, whose black eyes glittered in his sallow face. He was eyeing the girl, who stood close to the first attendant. ‘I’ll take her, too, I think.’

He grabbed her by the arm and pulled her to him, looking levelly at the first attendant. ‘As for you, you are dismissed.’

‘*Onoratissima!*’ said the girl, willingly snuggling up to the banker as the attendant tried to control the expression on his face. The second attendant disappeared into the room beyond the door, closing it behind him, as the banker led the girl back into the party.

The first attendant watched them go, then gave a resigned sigh. He started to leave, but then stopped, patting himself down. ‘My coin purse! What’s happened to it?’ he muttered, then looked in the direction the banker had gone with the girl. They were surrounded by laughing guests, amongst whom agile servants moved with silver trays loaded with food and drink. ‘Oh shit!’ he said to himself, and made his way back towards the front doors which, as he passed through them, closed behind him. Evidently all the guests had arrived. Ezio watched him go and thought, *If they continue to treat people like that, I should have no trouble mustering all the new recruits I need.*

Ezio turned and pushed his way through to a position close to the banker just as a herald appeared on a gallery and a trumpeter blew a short fanfare to make silence for him.

‘*Eminenze, signore, signori,*’ announced the herald. ‘Our esteemed lord, and guest of honour, the Duke of Valence and Romagna, Captain-General of the

Papal *Forze Armate*, Prince of Andria and Venafro, Count of Dyois and Lord of Piombino, Camerino and Urbino – His Grace *Messer* Cesare Borgia – is about to honour us with an address in the Great Inner Chamber.'

'Come on, my dear, you shall sit near me,' the banker said to the courtesan from The Rosa in Fiore, his bony hand snaking round her buttocks. Joining the press of people that now moved obediently through the double doors that led to the inner chamber, Ezio followed. He noticed that the other two girls were not far away, but were sensibly ignoring him. He wondered how many other allies his sister had managed to infiltrate into this gathering. If she succeeded in all he had asked her to do, he would have to do more than eat humble pie, but he also felt proud and reassured.

Ezio took a seat on an aisle near the middle of the assembly. Papal guards lined the edges of the room, and another row stood in front of the dais that had been erected at one end of it. Once everyone had settled, the women fanning themselves, for the room was hot, a familiar figure in black strode onto the dais. He was accompanied, Ezio noticed, by his father, although Rodrigo simply took a seat behind him. To his relief, Lucrezia was nowhere to be seen, though she must have been released by now.

'Welcome, my friends,' said Cesare, smiling a little. 'I know we all have a long night ahead of us.' He paused for the laughter and scattered applause. 'But I will not detain you long. My friends, I am honoured that the Cardinal of Santa Susanna has gone to so much trouble to help me celebrate my recent victories.'

Applause.

'And what better way shall I have to mark them than by joining in the brotherhood of Man? Soon we will gather here again for an even greater gala, for then we shall be celebrating a united Italy. Then, my friends, the feasting and revelry will last not one night, or two, or even five, six or seven – we shall spend *forty* days and nights in celebration.'

Ezio saw the Pope stiffen at this, but Rodrigo said nothing; he did not interrupt. The speech, as Cesare had promised, was a short one, amounting to a list of the new city states brought under his sway, and a vague outline of his plans for future conquests. When it was over, amid loud shouts of approval and applause, Cesare turned to go, but his way was blocked by Rodrigo, who was clearly struggling to suppress his fury. Ezio made his way forward to listen to the terse conversation that had started, sotto voce, between father and son. As for the other revellers, they had begun to drift back to the main hall, their minds already on the pleasures of the party ahead.

'We did not agree to conquer all Italy,' Rodrigo was saying, his voice full of spite.

‘But, *caro padre*, if your brilliant Captain-General says we can do it, why not rejoice and let it happen?’

‘You risk ruining everything! You risk upsetting the delicate balance of power we have worked so hard to maintain.’

Cesare’s lip curled. ‘I appreciate all that you have done for me, of course, *caro padre*, but do not forget that I control the army now, and that means that I make the decisions.’ He paused to let his words sink in. ‘Don’t look so glum. Enjoy yourself!’

With that, Cesare left the dais and went through a curtained door to one side. Rodrigo watched him go for a moment then, muttering to himself, followed.

Strut as much as you like for now, Cesare, thought Ezio. *I’ll pluck you down. In the meantime, your banker must pay the price for his involvement with you.*

Putting on the air of any other party guest, he sauntered in the same direction as the others. During the speech, the main hall had been transformed – beds and couches were placed around it under heavy canopies, and the floor had been covered with damask cushions and thick Persian rugs. Servants still passed among the guests, providing wine, but the guests had become more interested in one another. All over the room, men and women were shedding their clothes, in pairs, threesomes, foursomes and more. The smell of sweat rose with the heat.

Several women and not a few men, some not yet engaged in the fun and games, gave Ezio the eye, but few paid any serious attention to him as he made his way, using the columns of the room for cover, towards the banker, who had now shed his biretta, his magnificent ferraiolo and his cassock to reveal a spindly figure in a white cotton shirt and woollen long johns. He and the girl were half sitting, half lying on a canopied couch set into an alcove, more or less hidden from the view of the rest of the guests. Ezio drew near.

‘And are you having a pleasant evening, my dear?’ the banker was saying, his gnarled hands fiddling clumsily with the stays of her dress.

‘Yes, *Eminenza*, indeed I am. There is so much to look at.’

‘Oh, good. I spared no expense, you know.’ His lips slobbered over her neck. He bit and sucked, moving her hand lower.

‘I can tell,’ she replied, her eyes meeting Ezio’s over the banker’s shoulder and warning him to stay back for the moment.

‘Yes, sweetheart, the finer things in life make power so rewarding. If I see an apple growing on a tree, I simply pluck it. No one can stop me.’

‘Well,’ said the girl. ‘I suppose is does depend a bit on whose tree it is.’

The banker cackled. ‘You don’t seem to understand: *all* the trees are owned by me.’

‘Not mine, my dear.’

The banker drew back a little, and when he spoke again, frost had crept into his voice, ‘On the contrary, *tesora*, I saw you steal my attendant’s purse. I believe I’ve earned a free ride for your penance. In fact, I’m taking a free ride that’ll last all night long.’

‘Free?’ Ezio hoped the girl wasn’t pushing her luck. He glanced around the room. The few guards were stationed round its perimeter at intervals of perhaps fifteen feet, but none of them near. The banker, on his own ground, was clearly sure of himself. Perhaps a little too sure.

‘That’s what I said,’ replied the banker, the ghost of menace in his tone. Then a new thought struck him. ‘Do you have a sister by any chance?’

‘No, but I have a daughter.’

The banker considered this. ‘Three hundred ducats?’

‘Seven.’

‘You drive a hard bargain, but … done. A pleasure doing business with you.’

33

As the evening wore on, Ezio listened to the voices around him – ‘Do it again!’ ‘No, no, you’re hurting me!’ ‘No, you can’t do that. I won’t allow it!’ – and all the sounds of pain and pleasure – the pain real, the pleasure simulated.

The banker was not running out of steam, unfortunately, and, having lost patience fumbling with her, started to tear the girl’s dress off her. She still implored Ezio with her eyes to hold his ground. ‘I can handle this,’ she seemed to be saying to him.

He looked around the room again. Some of the servants and most of the guards had been inveigled by the guests to join in the fun, and he noticed people wielding wooden and ivory dildos, and little black whips.

Soon …

‘Come here, my dear,’ the banker was saying, pushing the girl back down onto the couch and, managing to straddle her, pushing himself into her. Then his hands closed round her neck and he started to strangle her. Choking, she struggled, then fainted.

‘Oh yes! That’s nice!’ he gasped, the veins in his neck bulging. His fingers tightened round the girl’s neck. ‘This should increase your pleasure. It certainly increases mine.’ A minute later he had finished and lay heavily on her body, slipping on their sweat as he caught his breath.

He had not killed the girl. Ezio could see the rise and fall of her chest.

The banker clawed his way to his feet, leaving her prostrate form half-on, half-off the couch.

He snapped out an order to a pair of servants who were still on duty nearby: ‘Get rid of her.’

As the banker moved towards the main orgy, Ezio and the servants watched him go. As soon as he was at a safe distance and otherwise occupied, the servants lifted the girl gently onto the couch, placed a carafe of water near her and covered her with a fur rug. One of them noticed Ezio. Ezio put a finger to his lips and the man smiled and nodded. At least there was some good in this fetid hellhole.

Ezio shadowed the banker as he pulled up his long johns and moved from group to group, muttering his appreciation like a connoisseur in an art gallery.

'Oh, *bellissima*,' he would say from time to time, stopping to watch, then he made for the iron-bound door he'd originally appeared from and knocked on it. It was opened from within by the second attendant, who'd almost certainly been spending all that time verifying the new accounts.

Ezio didn't give them a chance to close the door behind them; he leapt forward and pushed both men back inside. Ezio closed the door and faced them. The attendant, a little man in his shirtsleeves, burbled and fell to his knees, a dark stain flowering between his legs, before he fainted. The banker drew himself up.

'You!' he said. '*Assassino!* But not for much longer.' His arm snaked out to a bell pull, but Ezio was quicker. The Hidden Blade sprang out and slashed through the fingers of the hand the banker had extended. The banker snatched his maimed hand back as three fingers scattered onto the carpet. 'Stay back!' he screamed. 'Kill me and it'll do no good. Cesare will never let you live. But—'

'Yes?'

The man's face became sly. 'If you spare me …'

Ezio smiled. The banker understood. He nursed his ruined hand.

'Well,' he said, though tears of pain and rage were starting in his eyes. 'At least I have lived. The things I have seen, felt, tasted. I regret none of them. I do not regret a moment of my life.'

'You have played with the trinkets power brings. A man of real strength would be contemptuous of such things.'

'I gave the people what they wanted.'

'You delude yourself.'

'Spare me.'

'Your own debt is due, *Eminenza*. Unearned pleasure only consumes itself.'

The banker fell to his knees, mumbling half-remembered prayers.

Ezio raised the Hidden Blade.

'*Requiescat in Pace*,' he said.

He left the door open when he departed. The orgy had declined to some sleepy, smelly groping. One or two of the guests, supported by servants, were vomiting, while another pair of servants carried out a corpse: it had evidently all been too much for someone's heart. There was no one left on guard.

'We are ready,' said a voice at his elbow. He turned to see Claudia. Around the room, a dozen girls disentangled themselves and stood. Among them, dressed once more and looking shaken but otherwise fine, was the girl the banker had

molested so vilely. The servants who had helped her stood beside her. More recruits.

‘Get out of here,’ said Claudia. ‘We’ll recover the money. With interest.’

‘Can you—?’

‘Just … just this once, trust me, Ezio.’

34

Though his mind remained full of misgivings about leaving his sister in charge, Ezio admitted to himself that he had, after all, asked her to do this job for him. A lot hung on it, but he had better do as she'd said and trust her.

It was cold in the small hours of the new day, and he pulled his hood up as he slipped past the dozing guards posted outside the banker's palazzo. The torches had burned low and the house itself, no longer so brilliantly lit from within, seemed old, grey and tired. He toyed with the idea of going after Rodrigo, whom he hadn't seen since his furious departure from the dais after Cesare's speech – Cesare clearly had not chosen to stay at the party – but he put the notion aside. He wasn't going to storm the Vatican single-handed and he was tired.

Ezio returned to Tiber Island to clean up and refresh himself, but he didn't linger over it. He had to find out, as soon as possible, how Claudia had fared; only then would he be able truly to relax.

The sun was appearing over the horizon, turning the rooftops of Rome gold, as he skimmed over them in the direction of The Rosa in Fiore. From his vantage point, he saw a number of Borgia patrols running about the city in a state of high excitement and agitation, but the brothel was well-hidden, and its location was a respected secret among its clients – they certainly wouldn't want to be answerable to Cesare if he got wind of it – so Ezio wasn't surprised to find no Borgia uniforms in its vicinity. He dropped down to a street not far away, and walked, trying not to hurry, towards the bordello.

As he approached, however, he tensed. Outside, there were signs of a struggle and the pavement was stained with blood. Drawing his sword, and with a pounding heart, he made his way through the door, which he found ajar.

The furniture in the reception room had been overturned and the place was a mess. Broken vases lay on the floor, and the pictures on the walls – tasteful illustrations of some of the juicier episodes in Boccaccio – were askew. But that was not all. The bodies of three dead Borgia guards lay in the entrance and there was blood everywhere. He was making his way forward when one of the courtesans – the selfsame girl who had suffered at the hands of the banker –

came to greet him. Her dress and hands were covered in blood, but her eyes were shining.

‘Oh, Ezio, thank God you’re here.’

‘What happened?’ His thoughts flew to his mother and sister.

‘We got away all right, but the Borgia guards must have followed us all the way back here—’

‘What *happened*?!’

‘They tried to trap us inside – to ambush us.’

‘Where are Claudia and Maria?’

The girl was crying now. ‘Follow me.’

She preceded him in the direction of the inner courtyard of The Rosa in Fiore. Ezio followed, still in great trepidation, but he noticed that the girl was unarmed and, despite her distress, she led the way without fear. What kind of massacre … ? Had the guards killed everyone except her – how had she escaped? – and left taking the money with them?

The girl pushed open the door leading to the courtyard, where an appalling sight greeted his eyes , though it was not the one he had expected.

There were dead Borgia guards everywhere, and those that were alive were badly wounded or dying. In their midst, by the fountain, stood Claudia, her dress drenched in blood, with a rondel dagger in one hand and a stiletto in the other. Most of the girls whom Ezio had seen at the banker’s palazzo stood near her, similarly armed. To one side, protected by three of the girls, was Maria, and behind her, stacked against the wall, was not one, but seven metal boxes of the same type that Ezio had delivered to the banker.

Claudia was still on guard, as were the other women, expecting another wave of attacks.

‘Ezio!’ she said.

‘Yes,’ he replied, though he was looking at the carnage.

‘How did you come here?’

‘Over the rooftops, from Tiber Island.’

‘Did you see any more of them?’

‘Plenty, but they were running around in circles. None were near here.’

His sister relaxed slightly. ‘Good. Then we must get the street outside cleaned up and the door closed. Then we must do something about this mess.’

‘Did you … lose anyone?’

‘Two – Lucia and Agnella. We have already laid them on their beds. They died bravely.’

She wasn’t even trembling.

‘Are you all right?’ asked Ezio hesitantly.

‘Perfectly,’ she replied, composed. ‘We’ll need help disposing of this lot. Can you drum up some of your recruits to help? We left our new friends, the servants, behind at the palazzo, so that they can put anybody who asks off the scent.’

‘Did any of this patrol escape?’

Claudia looked grim. She hadn’t yet lowered either of her weapons. ‘Not one. No news will get back to Cesare.’

Ezio was silent for a moment. Nothing could be heard but the splashing of the fountain and the song of the morning birds.

‘How long ago?’

She half smiled. ‘You just missed the party.’

He smiled back. ‘No need for me. My sister knows how to wield a knife.’

‘And I’m ready to do it again.’

‘You speak like a true Auditore. Forgive me.’

‘You needed to test me.’

‘I wanted to protect you.’

‘As you see, I can take care of myself.’

‘I do see.’

Claudia dropped her weapons and made a gesture towards the treasure chests. ‘Enough interest for you?’

‘I see that you can totally outplay me and I am lost in admiration.’

‘Good.’

Then they did what they had been wanting to do for the last five minutes, and flung themselves into each other’s arms

‘Excellent,’ said Maria, joining them. ‘It’s good to see you’ve both come to your senses at last!’

35

‘Ezio!’

Ezio hadn’t expected to hear the familiar voice again so soon. A pessimistic part of him had not expected to hear it again at all. Nevertheless, he’d been pleased to get the note left for him at Tiber Island bidding him to this rendezvous, which he was keeping on his way to the Sleeping Fox, the headquarters of La Volpe’s Thieves’ Guild in Rome.

He looked round, but there was no one to be seen. The streets were empty, even of Borgia uniforms, for he was already in a district reclaimed by La Volpe’s men.

‘Leonardo?’

‘Over here!’ The voice came from a darkened doorway.

Ezio walked across to it and Leonardo dragged him into the shadows.

‘Were you followed?’

‘No.’

‘Thank God. I’ve been sweating blood.’

‘Were you … ?’

‘No. My friend, *Messer* Salai, watches my back. I’d trust him with my life.’

‘Your friend?’

‘We’re very close.’

‘Be careful, Leo, you have a soft heart where young men are concerned and that could be a chink in your armour.’

‘I may be soft-hearted, but I’m not a fool. Now, come on.’

Leonardo pulled Ezio out of the doorway after first looking up and down the street. A few yards to the right, he ducked down an alleyway that snaked between windowless buildings and featureless walls for a furlong or so, at which point it became part of a crossroads with three other alleys. Leonardo took the one on the left, and after another few yards arrived at a low, narrow door, which was painted dark green. This he unlocked. Both men had to squeeze through the entrance, but once inside Ezio found himself in a large vaulted hall. Natural light bathed the place through windows placed high in the walls, and the room was filled with trestle tables, cluttered and crowded with all manner of stuff: easels;

animal skeletons; dusty books; maps, rare and precious, like all maps – the Assassin Brotherhood's own collection at Monteriggioni had been invaluable, but the Borgia in their ignorance had destroyed the map room with cannonades, and so had no use of them themselves – pencils, pens, brushes, paints, piles of papers and drawings pinned to the walls … In short, it was the typical, familiar and somehow comforting clutter of Leonardo's studios wherever Ezio had encountered them.

'This is my own place,' said Leonardo proudly. 'As far as possible from my official workshop near Castel Sant'Angelo. No one comes here but me. And Salai, of course.'

'Don't they keep tabs on you?'

'They did for a while, but I'm good at ingratiation when it suits me and they swallowed the act whole. I rent this place from the Cardinal of San Pietro in Vincoli. He knows how to keep a secret and he's no friend of the Borgia.'

'There's no harm in taking out a little insurance for the future?'

'Ezio, my friend, nothing, but nothing, gets past you! Now, to business. I don't know if there's anything I can offer you – there must be a bottle of wine somewhere.'

'Leave it, don't worry. Just tell me why you sent for me.'

Leonardo went over to one of the trestle tables on the right-hand side of the hall and rummaged underneath it, then produced a long, leather-bound, wooden case, which he placed on the tabletop.

'Here we are,' he said with a flourish as he opened it.

The case was lined in purple velvet – 'Salai's idea, bless him!' explained Leonardo – and contained perfect copies of Ezio's lost Codex weapons: there was the Bracer for protecting the left forearm, the little retractable Pistol, the Double-Bladed Dagger and the Poison Blade.

'The Bracer was the biggest problem,' continued Leonardo. 'It was very hard to get a match for that extraordinary metal. From what you told me of the accident in which you lost the originals, it might have survived. If you could get it back … ?'

'If it did survive, it will be buried under several tons of rubble,' said Ezio. 'It might as well be at the bottom of the sea.' He slipped the Bracer on. It felt a little heavier than the first, but it looked as if it would serve very well. 'I don't know how to thank you,' he said.

'That's easy,' replied Leonardo. 'With money! But these are not all.' He delved under the table again and brought out another case, larger than the first. 'These are new, and may come in handy from time to time.'

He opened the lid to reveal a lightweight crossbow with a set of bolts, a set of darts and a mailed leather glove.

'The darts are poisoned,' said Leonardo, 'so don't ever touch the points with your bare hands. If you can retrieve them from your – ahem – target, you'll find they are re-usable up to a dozen times.'

'And the glove?'

Leonardo smiled. 'I'm rather proud of that. It'll enable you to climb on any surface with ease. Almost as good as becoming a gecko.' He paused, troubled. 'We haven't actually tested it on glass, but I doubt if you'll ever encounter a surface *that* smooth.' He paused. 'The crossbow's just a crossbow, but it's very compact and light. What makes it special is that it's just as powerful as those heavy things which are now being superseded by my wheel-locks – forgive me – and of course the advantage it has over a gun is that it's more or less silent.'

'I can't carry these with me now.'

Leonardo shrugged. 'No problem. We'll deliver them. To Tiber Island?'

Ezio considered. 'No. There's a bordello called The Rosa in Fiore. It's in the *rione* Montium et Biberatice, near the old forum with the column.'

'We'll find it.'

'Leave them there with my sister, Claudia. May I?' Ezio took a sheet of paper and scribbled something on it. 'Give this to her. I've sketched its location, as it's hard to find. I'll get the money to you as soon as possible.'

'Five thousand ducats.'

'*How* much?'

'Not cheap, these things …'

Ezio pursed his lips. 'Fine.' He took back the note and wrote an additional line. 'We have recently come into some new and … unexpected funds. My sister will pay you. And listen, Leo, I have to trust you. Not a word to anyone else.'

'Even Salai?'

'Salai if you have to. But if the brothel's location is discovered by the Borgia, I will kill Salai, and I will kill you, my friend.'

Leonardo smiled. 'I know these are very troubled times, my dear, but when – when – have I *ever* let you down?'

Content with that, Ezio took leave of his friend and continued on his way to the Sleeping Fox. He was running late, but the meeting with Leonardo had been more than worth it.

He went through the courtyard, pleased to see that business still seemed to be booming, and was about to announce himself to the thieves standing guard on

either side of the door marked *Uffizi* when La Volpe himself appeared, apparently out of nowhere – he was good at that.

‘*Buongiorno*, Ezio!’

‘*Ciao*, Gilberto!’

‘I’m glad you’ve come. What is it you want?’

‘Let’s sit somewhere quiet.’

‘In the *Uffizi*?’

‘Let’s stay here. What I have to say is for your ears alone.’

‘That’s good, for I have something to say to you, too, which should stay between us – for now.’

They settled down at a table in an otherwise empty bar inside the inn, away from the gamblers and drinkers.

‘It’s time to pay a visit to Lucrezia’s lover, Pietro,’ said Ezio.

‘Good. I’ve already got men out looking for him.’

‘*Molto bene*, but a working actor shouldn’t be that hard to find, and this one’s famous.’

La Volpe shook his head. ‘He’s famous enough to have minders of his own. And we think he may have gone to ground because he’s frightened of Cesare.’

‘That makes sense. Well, do your best. Now, what is it you have on your mind?’

La Volpe wrestled with himself for a moment, then said, ‘It’s delicate … Ezio, if I may …’

‘What is it?’

‘Someone has warned Rodrigo to stay away from the Castel Sant’Angelo.’

‘And you think that someone is … Machiavelli?’

La Volpe was silent.

‘Do you have proof?’ Ezio pressed him.

‘No, but …’

‘I know that Machiavelli troubles you, but listen, Gilberto, we must not be split apart by suspicion.’

At that moment the door banged open and they were interrupted by the arrival of a wounded thief, who staggered into the room. ‘Bad news!’ he cried. ‘The Borgia know the whereabouts of our spies!’

‘Who told them?’ thundered La Volpe, rising.

‘Maestro Machiavelli was asking about our search for the actor, Pietro, earlier today.’

La Volpe’s hand tightened into a fist. ‘Ezio?’ he said quietly.

‘They’ve got four of our men under guard,’ said the thief. ‘I was lucky to get away.’

‘Where?’

‘Not far from here, near Santa Maria dell’Orto.’

‘Come on!’ La Volpe yelled to Ezio.

Within minutes, La Volpe’s men had readied two horses and the two Assassins rode out of the stables of the Sleeping Fox at breakneck speed.

‘I still do not believe Machiavelli has turned traitor,’ insisted Ezio as they rode.

‘He went quiet for a bit, to allay our doubts,’ La Volpe hurled back. ‘But look at the facts: first the attack on Monteriggioni, then the business at the Castel Sant’Angelo, and now this. He is behind it all.’

‘Just ride! Ride like the devil! We may still be in time to save them.’

They galloped helter-skelter through the narrow streets, reining in and thrusting forward as they strove to avoid injuring the people and smashing down the market booths in their path. Citizens and chickens alike scattered in their path, but when Borgia guards tried to block their way, halberds raised, they simply rode them down.

They reached the place the wounded thief had indicated within seven minutes, and saw the Borgia uniforms preparing to pack the four captured thieves onto a covered wagon, hitting them with the pommels of their swords and taunting them as they did so. In a moment, Ezio and La Volpe were upon them like avenging Furies.

Swords drawn, they steered their mounts skilfully among the guards, cutting them off from their prisoners and dispersing them about the square in front of the church. Grasping his sword firmly in his right hand, La Volpe let go of his reins with his left and, holding on with his thighs, wheeled the horse towards the wagon, seized the driver’s whip from him and struck hard at the flanks of the horses in the shafts. They reared and neighed, then stampeded off, as the waggoner strove in vain to control them. Hurling the whip aside, and almost falling, La Volpe grabbed his reins again and swung his horse round to join Ezio, who was surrounded by five guards, who were stabbing at his horse’s chest and quarters with their halberds. Flailing them with his sword, La Volpe gave Ezio enough time to break free of the trap and slice open the midriff of the closest guard. Turning the horse round in a tight circle, he swiped again with his sword and neatly severed the head from the body of another. Meanwhile, La Volpe had despatched the last of the guards, while the rest either lay wounded or had fled.

‘Run, you swine!’ La Volpe yelled at his men. ‘Back to base! Now! We’ll join you there.!’

The four thieves pulled themselves together and darted down the main street out of the square, ducking and diving through the small crowd that had gathered

to watch the fight. Ezio and La Volpe rode after, shepherding them to make sure they all got back in one piece.

They made their way into the Sleeping Fox by a secret side entrance and had soon assembled in the bar, which now had a 'Closed' sign on its door. La Volpe ordered beer for his men, but did not wait for it to arrive before he started his interrogation.

'What were you able to find out?'

'Boss, there's a plan to kill the actor this evening. Cesare is sending his "butcher" to see to it.'

'Who's that?' asked Ezio.

'You've seen him,' replied La Volpe. 'Micheletto Corella. No one could ever forget a face like that.'

Indeed, Ezio's inner eye flashed on the man he'd seen at Cesare's right hand at Monteriggioni, and again in the stables of the Castel Sant'Angelo. A cruel, battered face that looked much older than its owner's age warranted, with hideous scars near his mouth, giving him the appearance of wearing a permanent, sardonic grin. Micheletto Corella. Originally *Miguel* de Corella. Corella – did that region of Navarre, which produced such good wine, really also produce this torturer and murderer?

'He can kill a person one hundred and fifty different ways,' La Volpe was saying, 'but his preferred method is strangulation.' He paused. 'He's certainly the most accomplished murderer in Rome. No one escapes him.'

'Let's hope tonight will be the first time,' said Ezio.

'Where this evening? Do you know?' La Volpe asked the thieves.

'Pietro's performing in a religious play this evening. He's been rehearsing at a secret location.'

'He must be scared. And?'

'He's playing Christ.' One of the thieves snickered at this. La Volpe glared. 'He's to be suspended from a cross,' continued the man who'd been talking. 'Micheletto will come at him with a spear and pierce his side – only it won't be make-believe.'

'Do you know where Pietro is?'

The thief shook his head. 'I cannot tell you that. We couldn't find out. But we do know that Micheletto will wait at the old Baths of the Emperor Trajan.'

'The Terme di Traiano?'

'Yes. We think the plan is this: Micheletto intends to disguise his men in costumes, and make the killing look like an accident.'

'But where's the performance taking place?'

‘We don’t know, but it can’t be far from where Micheletto will be waiting for his men to gather.’

‘I’ll go there and shadow him,’ Ezio decided. ‘He’ll lead me to Lucrezia’s lover.’

‘Anything else?’ La Volpe asked his men.

They shook their heads. A serving man came in then, bringing a tray containing beer, bread and salami, which the thieves fell on gratefully. La Volpe drew Ezio to one side.

‘Ezio, I am sorry, but I am convinced that Machiavelli has betrayed us.’ He held up a hand. ‘Whatever you say will not convince me otherwise. I know we would both wish to deny it, but the truth is now clear. In my opinion, we should … do what needs to be done.’ He paused. ‘And if you don’t, I will.’

‘I see.’

‘And there’s another thing, Ezio. God knows I’m loyal, but I also have the welfare of my men to consider. Until this thing is settled, I’m not putting them at unnecessary risk any more.’

‘You have your priorities, Gilberto, and I have mine.’

Ezio left, to prepare himself for his evening’s work. Borrowing a horse from La Volpe, he made his way straight to The Rosa in Fiore, where Claudia greeted him.

‘You’ve had a delivery,’ she said.

‘Already?’

‘Two men, both very dapper. One quite young and a bit shifty-looking, but handsome in a pretty sort of way. The other, maybe fifty – a few years older than you, anyway. Of course, I remembered him – your old friend Leonardo – but he was quite formal. He gave me this note and I paid him.’

‘That was quick.’

Claudia smiled. ‘He said he thought you might appreciate an *express* delivery.’

Ezio smiled back. It would be good to encounter tonight’s villains – he imagined Micheletto’s men would be trained to a very high standard – armed with a few of his old friends, the Codex weapons. But he’d need backup, too, and from La Volpe’s attitude, he knew he couldn’t depend on the loan of a contingent of thieves.

His thoughts turned to his own militia of new recruits. It was time to put a few of them through their paces.

36

Unknown to Ezio, *Messer* Corella had one other small piece of business to conclude for his boss before the main event of the evening. But it was still quite early.

He stood silently on a deserted dock by the Tiber. A few barges and two ships rode at anchor, gently moving with the river's flow. The ships' grubby furled sails rippled slightly in the wind. A group of guards wearing Cesare's insignia were coming towards them, half hauling, half carrying a blindfolded man between them. At their head was Cesare himself.

Micheletto recognized the man, without surprise, as Francesco Troche.

'Please,' Francesco was whimpering, 'I have done nothing wrong.'

'Francesco, my dear friend,' said Cesare. 'The facts are plain. You told your brother about my plans in the Romagna, and he contacted the Venetian ambassador.'

'It was an accident. I am still your servant and your ally.'

'Are you demanding that I discount your actions and rely on mere friendship?'

'I am … asking, not demanding.'

'My dear Francesco, in order to unite Italy I must have every institution under my control. You know what higher organization we serve – the Order of Templars, of which I am now head.'

'I thought your father …'

'And if the Church does not fall in line,' continued Cesare firmly, 'I will eliminate it entirely.'

'But you know that I really work for you, not the Pope.'

'Ah, but do I, Troche? There's only one way I can be unconditionally sure of that now.'

'Surely you can't intend to kill me, your most loyal friend?'

Cesare smiled. 'Of course not.'

He snapped his fingers. Noiselessly, Micheletto approached from behind Francesco's back.

'You are … you are letting me go?' Relief flooded into Troche's voice. 'Thank you, Cesare. Thank you from my heart. You will not regret—'

But his words were cut short as Micheletto, a thin cord twisted between his hands, leant forward and bound it tightly round his neck. Cesare watched for a moment, but even before Francesco was completely dead, he turned to the captain of the guard and said, 'Have you got the costumes for the play ready?'

'Yessir!'

'Then give them to Micheletto when he's finished.'

'Yessir!'

'Lucrezia is mine and mine alone. I didn't think she was that important to me, but when I got that message in Urbino, from one of her own men, that that wretched toad of an actor had been pawing her, slobbering over her, I came back immediately. Can you understand a passion like that, captain?'

'Yessir!'

'You're a fool. Have you done, Micheletto?'

'*Messere*, the man is dead.'

'Then weigh him down with stones and dump him in the Tiber.'

'I obey, Cesare.'

The captain had given orders to his men, and four of them had gone to fetch two large wicker hampers, which they now carried between them.

'Here are the costumes for your men. Make doubly sure the work is done correctly.'

'Indeed, *Messere*.'

Cesare stalked off, leaving his subordinate to make his arrangements. Motioning to the guards to follow him, Micheletto led the way towards the Baths of Trajan.

Ezio and his band of recruits were already at the baths, hidden in the shelter of a ruined portico. He had noticed a number of men in black already gathered, and he watched them closely as Micheletto appeared. The guards put the baskets of costumes down and Micheletto motioned them to depart. The shadows were deep, and Ezio nodded to his men to prepare themselves. He had strapped the Bracer to his left forearm, and the Poison Blade to his right.

Micheletto's men formed a line, and as each man came up to his leader, he was handed a costume – they were uniforms in the style of those worn by Roman legionaries at the time of Christ. Ezio noticed that Micheletto himself wore the costume of a centurion.

As each man stepped away to don his costume, Ezio stood ready. Silently, he extended the concealed Poison Blade that Leonardo had re-crafted for him. The unsuspecting thugs went down without a whisper, then his own recruits put on the theatrical clothes, and pulled Micheletto's henchmen's bodies out of sight.

Absorbed in his work, Micheletto was unaware, once everyone was in costume, that the men he now commanded were not his own. He led them, with Ezio close behind, in the direction of the Colosseum.

A stage had been erected in the ruins of the old Roman amphitheatre where, since the time of the Emperor Titus, gladiators had fought each other to the death, *bestiarii* had dispatched wild animals in their tens of thousands, and Christians had been thrown to the lions. It was a gloomy place, but the gloom was dispersed somewhat by the hundreds of flickering torches that illuminated the stage, while the audience, ranged on benches on a wooden grandstand, were absorbed in watching a play on the subject of Christ's Passion.

'I seek Pietro Benintendi,' Micheletto said to the doorkeeper, showing him a warrant.

'He acts onstage, *signore*,' replied the doorkeeper. 'But one of my men will take you to where you may wait for him.'

Micheletto turned to his 'companions'. 'Don't forget,' he told them. 'I will be wearing this black cloak with the white star on its shoulder. Cover my back and wait for your cue, which will be Pontius Pilate's order to the centurion to strike.'

I must get to Pietro before he does, thought Ezio, tagging along at the back of the group as they followed their leader into the Colosseum.

Onstage, three crosses had been erected. He watched as his recruits disposed themselves according to Micheletto's orders and Micheletto himself took his place in the wings.

The play was reaching its climax:

'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' cried Pietro from the cross.

'Hark,' said one of the actors playing the Pharisees. 'How he crieth upon Elijah to deliver him!'

One, dressed as a Roman legionary, dipped a sponge in vinegar and placed it on the tip of his spear. 'Wait and see whether Elijah dare come here or not.'

'My thirst is great; my thirst is great,' cried Pietro.

The soldier raised the sponge to Pietro's lips.

'Yea, thou shalt drink no more,' said another Pharisee.

Pietro raised his head. 'Mighty God in Majesty,' he declaimed. 'To work Thy Will I shall never cease. My spirit I betake to Thee; receive it, O Lord, into Thy hands.' Pietro gave a great sigh. '*Consummatum est!*'

His head dropped. Christ had 'died'.

On cue, Micheletto strode onto the stage, his centurion's uniform glittering under the thrown-back black cloak. Ezio, watching, wondered what had become of the actor originally playing the centurion, but imagined that he had met a fate similar to that of most of Micheletto's victims.

‘Lords, I say unto you,’ recited Micheletto boldly, ‘this was indeed the Son of God the Father Almighty. I know it must be so. I know by the manner of his cry that He has fulfilled the prophecy, and the godhead is revealed in Him!’

‘Centurion,’ said the actor playing Caiaphas, ‘as God gives me speed, thy folly is great indeed. Thou dost not understand! When thou seest His heart bleed, then we shall see what thou wilt say. Longinus, take this spear into thy hand.’

Caiaphas handed a wooden spear to the actor playing the Roman legionary, Longinus, a large man with flowing locks – *clearly a favourite of the audience and doubtless*, thought Ezio, *a bitter rival of Pietro’s*.

‘Take this spear and take good heed,’ added one of the Pharisees for good measure. ‘Thou must pierce the side of Jesus Nazarenus that we shall know He is truly dead.’

‘I will do as thou biddest me,’ declaimed Longinus, ‘but on your heads be it. Whatever the consequence, I wash my hands of it.’

He then made a great show of stabbing Jesus’ side with the prop spear and, as the blood and water spilled forth from a hidden sac concealed in Pietro’s loincloth, so Longinus began his big speech. Ezio could see the beady glint in the ‘dead’ Jesus’ eyes as Pietro watched him jealously.

‘High King of Heaven, I see Thee here. Let water be thrown onto my hands and onto my spear, and let my eyes be bathed, too, that I may see thee more clearly.’ He made a dramatic pause. ‘Alas, alack and woe is me! What is this deed that I have done? I think that I have slain a man, sooth to say, but what manner of man I know not. Lord God in Heaven, I cry you mercy, for it was my body which guided my hand, not my soul.’ Allowing himself another pause for a round of applause, he ploughed on. ‘Lord Jesus, much have I heard spoken of Thee – that Thou hast healed, through Thy pity, both the sick and the blind. And, let Thy Name be praised! – Thou hast healed me this day of my own blindness – my blindness of spirit. Henceforward, Lord, Thy follower will I be. And in three days Thou shalt rise again to rule and judge us all.’

The actor who was playing Joseph of Arimathea, the wealthy Jewish leader who donated his own tomb – which had already been built – for the housing of Christ’s body, then spoke: ‘Ah, Lord God, what heart had You to allow them to slay this man that I see here dead and hanging from a cross, a man who ne’er did aught amiss? For surely, God’s own Son is He. Therefore, in the tomb that is made for me, therein shall His body buried be – for He is King of Bliss.’

Nicodemus, Joseph’s colleague in the Sanhedrin and a fellow sympathizer, added his voice: ‘*Ser* Joseph, I say surely, this is God’s Son Almighty. Let us request His body of Pontius Pilate, and nobly buried He shall be. And I will help thee to take Him down devotedly.’

Joseph then turned to the actor playing Pilate and spoke again: '*Ser* Pilate, I ask of thee a special boon to grant me as thou may. This prophet that is dead today – allow me of his body custody.'

While Micheletto took up position very near the central cross, Ezio slipped backstage. There, he rummaged swiftly through a costume skip and found a rabbinical robe, which he hurriedly put on. He returned to the stage from backstage left, managing to slip in just behind Micheletto without anyone noticing or the action skipping a beat.

'Joseph, if indeed Jesus Nazarenus is dead, as the centurion must confirm, I will not deny you custody.' Turning to Micheletto, Pilate spoke again: 'Centurion! Is Jesus dead?'

'Ay, *Ser* Governor,' said Micheletto flatly, and Ezio noticed him draw a stiletto from under his cloak. Ezio had replaced his Poison Blade, now exhausted of venom, with his trusty Hidden Blade, and with it he now pierced Micheletto's side, holding him upright and manoeuvring him offstage, in the direction he had come. Once backstage, he laid the man down.

Micheletto fixed him with a glittering look. 'Hah!' he said. 'You cannot save Pietro. The vinegar on the sponge was poisoned. As I promised Cesare, I made doubly sure.' He fought for breath. 'You had better finish me.'

'I did not come here to kill you. You helped your master rise and you will fall with him. You don't need me; you are the agent of your own destruction. If you live, well, a dog always returns to its master, and you will lead me to my real quarry.'

Ezio had no time for more; he had to save Pietro.

As he rushed back onstage, he was greeted by a scene of chaos. Pietro was writhing on the cross and vomiting as he turned the colour of a peeled almond. The audience was in uproar.

'What's going on? What's happening?' cried Longinus, as the other actors scattered.

'Cut him down!' Ezio yelled to his recruits. Some threw keenly aimed daggers to slice through the ropes that bound Pietro to the cross, while others stood ready to catch him. Still more were fighting back the Borgia guards who had appeared from nowhere and were storming the stage.

'This wasn't in the script!' gurgled Pietro as he fell into the arms of the recruits.

'Will he die?' asked Longinus hopefully. One rival less is always good news in a tough profession.

'Hold off the guards!' shouted Ezio, leading the recruits off stage and carrying Pietro in his arms across a shallow pool of water in the middle of the Colosseum,

disturbing dozens of drinking pigeons, which flew up and away in alarm. The very last glimmer from the setting sun bathed Ezio and Pietro in a dull red light.

Ezio had trained his recruits well, and those bringing up the rearguard successfully fought off the pursuing Borgia guards as the rest made their way out of the Colosseum and into the network of streets to the north. Ezio led the way to the house of a doctor of his acquaintance. He hammered on the door and, having been granted reluctant admission, had Pietro laid on a table covered with a palliasse in the doctor's consulting room, from whose beams a baffling number of dried herbs hung in organized bunches, giving the room a pungent smell. On shelves, unidentifiable or unmentionable objects, creatures and parts of creatures floated in glass bottles filled with cloudy liquid.

Ezio ordered his men outside to keep watch. He wondered what any passers-by might think if they saw a bunch of Roman soldiers. They'd probably think they were seeing ghosts and run a mile. He himself had shed his Pharisee outfit at the first opportunity.

'Who are you?' murmured Pietro. Ezio was concerned to see that the actor's lips had turned blue.

'Your saviour,' said Ezio. To the doctor he said, 'He's been poisoned, *Dottore* Brunelleschi.'

Brunelleschi examined the actor quickly, shining a light into his eyes. 'From the pallor, it looks like they used cantarella. The poison of choice for our dear masters, the Borgia.' To Pietro, he said, 'Lie still.'

'Feel sleepy,' said Pietro.

'Lie still! Has he been sick?' Brunelleschi asked Ezio.

'Yes.'

'Good.' The doctor bustled about, mixing fluids from the different-coloured glass bottles with practised ease and pouring the mixture into a phial. This he handed to Pietro, propping his head up.

'Drink this.'

'Hurry up,' said Ezio urgently.

'Just give him a moment.'

Ezio watched anxiously, and after what seemed an age, the actor sat up.

'I think I feel slightly better,' he said.

'*Miracolo*!' said Ezio in relief.

'Not really,' said the doctor. 'He can't have had much, and for my sins I've had quite a bit of experience with cantarella victims – it's enabled me to develop a pretty effective antidote. Now,' he continued judiciously, 'I'll apply some leeches. They will lead to a full recovery. You can rest here, my boy, and very

soon you'll be as right as rain.' He bustled some more and produced a glass jar full of black, wriggling creatures. He scooped out a handful.

'I cannot thank you enough,' said Pietro to Ezio. 'I—'

'You *can* thank me enough,' replied Ezio briskly. 'The key to the little gate you use for your trysts at the Castel Sant'Angelo with Lucrezia. Give it to me. Now!'

Misgiving appeared on Pietro's face. 'What are you talking about? I'm simply a poor actor, a victim of circumstance … I …'

'Listen, Pietro, Cesare knows about you and Lucrezia.'

Now misgiving was replaced by fear. 'Oh God!'

'But I can help you. If you give me the key.'

Mutely, Pietro delved into his loincloth and handed it over. 'I always keep it with me,' he said.

'Wise of you,' said Ezio, pocketing the key. It was reassuring to have it, for it would guarantee him access to the Castel whenever he had need of it.

'My men will fetch your clothes and get you to a place of safety. I'll detail a couple of them to keep watch over you. Just keep out of sight for a while.'

'But … my public!' wailed the actor.

'They'll have to make do with Longinus until it's safe for you to put your head above the parapet again,' grinned Ezio. 'I shouldn't worry. He isn't a patch on you.'

'Oh, do you really think so?'

'No question.'

'Ouch!' said Pietro, as the first leech went on.

In the wink of an eye, Ezio had disappeared outside. There he gave the necessary orders to his men. 'Get out of those costumes as soon as you can,' he added. 'The Baths of Trajan aren't far. With any luck, your street clothes will still be where you left them.'

He departed on his own, but he hadn't gone far when he noticed a figure skulking in the shadows. As soon as the man felt Ezio's eyes on him, he cut and ran. But not before Ezio had recognized Paganino, the thief who'd been determined to stay behind at the sack of Monteriggioni.

Hey!' Ezio shouted, giving chase. '*Un momento!*'

The thief certainly knew his way around these streets. Ducking and diving, he was so adroit that Ezio all but lost him in the pursuit, and more than once had to leap to the rooftops to scan the streets below in order to locate the man again. Leonardo's magical glove came in surprisingly handy at such times, he found.

At last he managed to get ahead of his prey and cut off his line of escape. The thief went for his dagger, an ugly-looking cinquedea, but Ezio quickly wrested it

out of his hand so that it clattered harmlessly to the pavement.

‘Why did you run?’ asked Ezio, pinioning the man. Then he noticed a letter protruding from the man’s leather belt-pouch. The seal was unmistakeable: it was that of Pope Alexander VI – Rodrigo – the Spaniard!

Ezio let out a long breath as a series of suspicions fell into place. Long ago Paganino had been with Antonio de Magianis’ Thieves’ Guild in Venice. He must have been offered enough money by the Borgia to switch sides, and then he’d infiltrated La Volpe’s group here – the Borgia had had a mole at the heart of the Assassin organization all along.

Here was the traitor – not Machiavelli at all!

While Ezio’s attention was distracted, the thief wrenched himself free and, in a flash, seized his fallen weapon. His desperate eyes met Ezio’s.

‘Long live the Borgia!’ he cried, and thrust the cinquedea firmly into his own breast.

Ezio looked down at the fallen man as he thrashed about in his death agonies. Well, better this death than a slow one at the hands of his masters – Ezio well knew the price exacted by the Borgia for failure. He stuffed the letter into his doublet and made off. *Merda*, he thought to himself. *I was right. And now I have to stop La Volpe before he gets to Machiavelli.*

37

As Ezio made his way across the city, he was accosted by Saraghina, one of the girls from The Rosa in Fiore.

‘You must come quickly,’ she said. ‘Your mother wants to see you urgently.’

Ezio bit his lip. There should be time. ‘Hurry,’ he said.

Once at the bordello, he found Maria waiting for him, and her face betrayed her anxiety.

‘Ezio,’ she said. ‘Thank you for coming to see me.’

‘I have to be quick, Mother.’

‘There’s something amiss.’

‘Tell me.’

‘The old proprietor of this establishment—’

‘*Madonna* Solari?’

‘Yes.’ Maria collected herself. ‘It turns out she was a cheat and a liar. We’ve discovered that she was playing *il doppio gioco*, and she had close ties with the Vatican. Worse, several of those still employed here may be—’

‘Don’t worry, *Madre*. I’ll root them out. I’ll send my most trusted recruits to interview the girls. Under Claudia’s direction, they will soon get at the truth.’

‘Thank you, Ezio.’

‘We will ensure that only girls loyal to us remain here. As for the rest …’ The expression on Ezio’s face was harsh.

‘I have other news.’

‘Yes?’

‘We have word that ambassadors from King Ferdinand of Spain and from the Holy Roman Emperor, Maximilian, have arrived in Rome. It seems they seek an alliance with Cesare.’

‘Are you sure, Mother? What need have they of him?’

‘I don’t know, *figlio mio*.’

Ezio’s jaw was set. ‘We had better be safe rather than sorry. Ask Claudia to investigate for me. I give her a full mandate to give orders to the recruits I will send.’

‘You trust her for this?’

‘Mother, after the business with the banker, I would trust the two of you with my life. I am ashamed not to have done so before, but it was only my anxiety for your safety that—’

Maria held up a hand. ‘You do not need to explain. And there is nothing to forgive. We are all friends again now. That is what matters.’

‘Thank you. Cesare’s days are numbered. Even if the ambassadors gain his support, they will soon find it is worthless.’

‘I hope your confidence is well-founded.’

‘Believe me, Mother, it is. Or will be – if I can save Machiavelli from La Volpe’s misguided suspicion.’

38

Borrowing a horse from the stables he had liberated, Ezio rode post-haste to the Sleeping Fox. It was crucial that he get there before anything happened to Machiavelli. Lose him and he'd lose the best brains in the Brotherhood.

Although the hour was not that late, he was alarmed to see that the inn was closed. He had his own key and let himself in through the wicket gate.

The scene that met his eyes told him that he had arrived not a moment too soon. The members of the Thieves' Guild were all present. La Volpe and his principal lieutenants stood together, busily discussing something that appeared to be of great importance, and it looked as though judgement had been reached, since La Volpe, a baleful look on his face, was approaching Machiavelli, a businesslike basilard in his right hand. Machiavelli, for his part, looked unconcerned, seemingly without any idea about what was happening.

'Stop!' shouted Ezio, bursting in on the scene and catching his breath after his headlong ride.

All eyes turned to him, while La Volpe stood rooted to the spot.

'Stay your hand, Gilberto!' commanded Ezio. 'I have discovered the real traitor.'

'What?' said La Volpe, shocked, against a background of excited murmuring from his people.

'He is – was – one of your own men: Paganino! He was present at the attack on Monteriggioni, and now I see his mischief in many of our recent misfortunes.'

'Are you sure of this?'

'He himself revealed his guilt.'

La Volpe's brow darkened. He sheathed his dagger. 'Where is he now?' he growled.

'Where no one can touch him any more.'

'Dead?'

'By his own hand. He was carrying this letter.' Ezio held the sealed parchment aloft and passed the letter to La Volpe. Machiavelli came up as the thieves' leader broke the seal and opened the paper.

‘My God!’ said La Volpe, scanning the words.

‘Let me see,’ said Machiavelli.

‘Of course,’ La Volpe said, crestfallen.

Machiavelli was scanning the letter. ‘It’s from Rodrigo to Cesare. Details of our plans for the French general, Octavien – amongst other things.’

‘One of my own men!’

‘This is good news,’ Machiavelli said to Ezio. ‘We can substitute this letter with another containing false information – put them off the scent …’

‘Good news indeed,’ replied Ezio, but his tone was cold. ‘Gilberto, you should have listened to me.’

‘I am once again in your debt, Ezio,’ said La Volpe, humbly.

Ezio also allowed himself a smile. ‘What debt can there be amongst friends who trust – who *must* trust – one another?’

Before La Volpe could reply, Machiavelli put in: ‘And congratulations, by the way. I gather you resurrected Christ three days early.’

Ezio laughed, thinking of his rescue of Pietro. How did Machiavelli find out about things so *fast*?!

La Volpe looked around at the men and women of the Guild gathered around them. ‘Well, what are you staring at?’ he said. ‘We’re losing business here.’

Later, after Machiavelli had left to deal with the intercepted letter, La Volpe drew Ezio aside. ‘I’m glad you are here,’ he said, ‘and not just because you prevented me from making a total fool of myself.’

‘More than that,’ said Ezio lightly. ‘Do you know what I would have done to you if you had killed Niccolò?’

La Volpe grunted. ‘Ezio …’ he said.

Ezio clapped him on the back. ‘But all’s well. No more quarrels. Within the Brotherhood, we cannot afford them. Now, what is it you wanted to say to me? Do you have need of my assistance?’

‘I do. The Guild is strong, but many of my men are young and untested. Look at that kid who nicked your purse. Look at young Claudio …’

‘And your point is … ?’

‘I was coming to that. Generally, the thieves in Rome are young men and women – skilled in their trade, sure, but young and prone to rivalries. Damaging rivalries.’

‘Are you speaking of another gang?’

‘Yes. One in particular, which may pose a threat. I need reinforcements to deal with them.’

‘My recruits?’

La Volpe was silent, then he said, ‘I know I refused you help when my suspicions about Niccolò were at their height, but now …’

‘Who are they?’

‘They call themselves the *Cento Occhi* – the One Hundred Eyes. They are creatures of Cesare Borgia and they cause us significant trouble.’

‘Where is their base?’

‘My spies have located it.’

‘Where?’

‘Just a moment. They are angry and they are spoiling for a fight.’

‘Then we must surprise them.’

‘*Bene!*’

‘But we must be prepared for retaliation.’

‘We will strike first, then they will have no opportunity for retaliation.’ La Volpe, now more his old self, rubbed his hands in anticipation. ‘The main thing is to take out their leaders. They alone have direct contact with the Borgia. Remove them and we will have beheaded the *Cento Occhi*.’

‘And you really need my help for this?’

‘You broke the power of the Wolfmen.’

‘Without your help.’

‘I know.’

‘The man who helped me break the Wolfmen was …’

‘I *know*!’

‘Listen, Gilberto. We will combine forces and do this together – have no fear of that. Then, I presume, your Guild will be the dominant cartel in Rome.’

‘That is true,’ agreed La Volpe reluctantly.

‘If I help you in this,’ said Ezio slowly, ‘there is a condition.’

‘Yes?’

‘That you shall not, again, threaten the unity of the Brotherhood. For that is what you almost did.’

La Volpe bowed his head. ‘I am schooled,’ he said meekly.

‘Whether we succeed in this venture of yours or fail.’

‘Whether we succeed or fail,’ agreed La Volpe. ‘But we won’t.’

‘Won’t what?’

La Volpe gave his friend a Mephistophelean grin. ‘Fail,’ he said.

39

Having detailed a group of his growing recruit-militia to help La Volpe in his efforts against the *Cento Occhi*, Ezio made his way back to his lodgings. He refilled the Poison Blade's inner phial with the venom Leonardo had prepared especially, and checked and cleaned the retractable Pistol, the Double Blade, and the new crossbow and poison darts.

His work was interrupted by a messenger from Bartolomeo, bidding him come to the mercenaries' barracks as quickly as possible. Sensing trouble, and worried about it – he had hoped that Bartolomeo and his *condottieri* had the French in check – Ezio packed the Codex weapons he judged he might need into a saddlebag and made his way to the stables, where he rented his favourite horse and set off. It was a fine day, and the road was more or less dry, since rain had held off for about a week. The countryside seemed a little dusty as he rode through it, taking care to choose a route obscure enough not to be monitored by Borgia troops, and taking the odd short cut through the woods and across fields, where cows raised their heads idly from their grazing to watch him pass.

It was afternoon by the time he reached the barracks, and all seemed quiet. He noticed that, since their renovation, the ramparts and walls had taken a slight bruising from French cannonades, but the damage wasn't serious, and a handful of men were busy on scaffolding or slung in baskets from the battlements, repairing the gouges and cracks the cannonballs had made.

He dismounted and handed the bridle to an ostler who came running up, gently wiping the little flecks of foam from his horse's mouth – he hadn't ridden her hard. Ezio patted her muzzle before making his way, unannounced, across the parade ground in the direction of Bartolomeo's quarters.

His mind was on his next step, now that Cesare's banker had been removed, and he was considering what counter-action his enemy might take to ensure that there was no cessation in his supply of funds, so he was surprised to find himself nose to the tip with Bianca, Bartolomeo's great sword.

'Who goes there?' bellowed Bartolomeo.

'*Salve* to you, too,' rejoined Ezio.

Bartolomeo gave vent to a huge belly laugh. 'Got you!'

‘Teach me to be on my toes.’

‘Actually,’ Bartolomeo gave a theatrical wink, ‘I was expecting my wife.’

‘Well, well.’

Bartolomeo lowered his sword and embraced Ezio. When he released him from the bear hug, his expression was more serious.

‘I’m glad you’ve come, Ezio.’

‘What’s the matter?’

‘Look.’

Ezio followed his friend’s gaze to where a platoon of wounded mercenaries were entering the parade ground.

‘The French *puttane* have got us under pressure again,’ said Bartolomeo, answering Ezio’s unspoken question.

‘I thought you’d barked the shins of their general – what’s his name?’

‘Octavien de Valois thinks he’s some kind of descendant of the noble house of Valois. Some wretched spawn of a bastard, if you ask me.’

Bartolomeo spat as another contingent of wounded men appeared.

‘Looks serious,’ said Ezio.

‘King Louis must have sent reinforcements to back up Cesare after we gave Valois a bashing.’ Bartolomeo scratched his beard. ‘I suppose I should be flattered.’

‘How bad is it?’

‘They’ve got their tower back,’ said Bartolomeo grumpily.

‘We’ll get it back. Where’s Valois now?’

‘You’re right.’ Bartolomeo ignored the question. ‘Of course we’ll get it back again! We’ll have the scoundrels in retreat before you can say *fottere*! It’s only a matter of time.’

Just then, a bullet whizzed past their ears and embedded itself in the wall behind them.

‘It was so quiet when I rode up,’ said Ezio, looking at the sky. The sun had gone behind large clouds, which had suddenly rolled across the sky.

‘*Seemed* so quiet, you mean. They’re sneaky bastards, the French. But I’ll have Valois by the throat soon enough, mark my word.’ He turned to yell an order to a sergeant who’d come running up. ‘Close the gates! Get those men off the outer walls! *Move!*’

Men ran hither and thither, manning the battlements and priming the cannon.

‘Don’t worry, friend,’ said the big *condottiero*. ‘I’ve got the situation well in hand.’

At that moment a large cannonball crashed into the ramparts nearest the two men, sending dust and shards of stone flying in all directions.

‘They seem to be getting closer!’ yelled Ezio.

Bartolomeo’s men fired a salvo from the barracks’ main cannon by way of reply and the walls seemed to shake with the report from the great guns. The response from the French artillery was just as ferocious: the thunder of two score guns tore at the air, and this time the balls found their marks more accurately. Bartolomeo’s men were still desperately trying to restore defensive orders when another huge salvo from the French rocked the walls of the barracks. This time the French seemed to be focusing their efforts on the main gate and two of the gatekeepers fell dead, having been caught up in the bombardment.

‘CLOSE THE FUCKIN’ GATES!’ roared Bartolomeo.

The well-trained soldiers under Bartolomeo’s command rushed forward to repel the sortie of French troops who, without warning, had appeared at the main entrance of the barracks. The French had clearly been holding back for this surprise attack and unfortunately, thought Ezio to himself, they had managed to gain the upper hand. Bartolomeo’s fortress had been caught unprepared for an attack.

Bartolomeo jumped down from the battlements and ran towards the gate at full tilt. Whirling Bianca, he towered above the Frenchmen, and the great broadsword sliced viciously into their ranks. The French soldiers seemed to halt in trepidation at Bartolomeo’s arrival. Meanwhile Ezio directed the musketeers to cover those men who strove to push the gates closed before the enemy could gain a surer foothold inside the barracks. The Assassin troops rallied with the presence of their leader and succeeded in pushing the gates closed, but only seconds later there was an almighty crash and the wooden bar that held the gates shut bowed ominously. The French had succeeded in manoeuvring a battering ram to the main gates while the defenders’ attention was focused on the French soldiers who’d breached the barrack walls.

‘We should have built a fuckin’ moat!’ yelled Bartolomeo.

‘There wasn’t time for that!’

Ezio shouted at the musketeers to divert their fire outside the walls at the gathering French forces. Bartolomeo leapt up the ramparts and stood next to Ezio, who was watching the scene unfolding – French troops had appeared from nowhere, and in great numbers.

‘We’re surrounded!’ cursed Bartolomeo, without exaggeration.

Behind them, one of the minor gates caved in with a crash and a splintering of timber, and before any of the defenders could do anything to prevent it, a large unit of French infantry stormed in, swords drawn and seemingly willing to fight to the death. This sudden infiltration succeeded in cutting Bartolomeo’s quarters off from the rest.

‘Oh my God, what are they up to now?’ shouted Bartolomeo. The Assassin soldiers were better trained than the French – and usually more resolved to their cause – but the sheer weight of numbers and the suddenness of the attack had caught them unawares. It was all they could do to hold the line and slowly try to move the French squadron back. The air was thick with the chaos of close-quarters hand-to-hand combat. The space was so crowded that in places the battle had turned into a straightforward fist fight as there was no longer room to wield weapons.

The atmosphere was hot and claustrophobic with the brewing storm – it was as if the gods were frowning on the scene as great storm clouds oppressed the sky overhead. The dust of the parade-ground floor rose up like a mist, and the day, which had been so fine only moments earlier, turned dark. Soon afterwards, the rain began to fall in torrents and the pitched battle turned into a confused rout, in which the two opposing forces could barely see what they were doing. The ground turned to mud and the fighting became more and more desperate and chaotic.

Then suddenly, as if the enemy had achieved some purpose, the French trumpets sounded a retreat and Valois’s men withdrew as swiftly as they had arrived.

It took a while to restore order, and Bartolomeo’s first concern was to order carpenters to replace the shattered gate with a new one. Naturally they had one ready in case of just such an eventuality, but it would take an hour to install it. Meanwhile, he led Ezio in the direction of his quarters.

‘What the hell were they after?’ he asked no one in particular. ‘My maps? They’re precious, those maps!’

He was interrupted by another French fanfare. With Ezio close behind, he ran up one of the stairways leading to a high rampart above the main gate. There, only a short distance away on the scrubby, cypress-scattered plain in front of the barracks, sat the Général Duc Octavien de Valois himself, on horseback, surrounded by a knot of his officers and infantry. Two of the infantrymen were holding a prisoner, whose body was obscured by a sack thrown over the head.

‘*Bonjour, Général d’Alviano*,’ smarmed the Frenchman, looking up at Bartolomeo. ‘*Êtes-vous prêt à vous rendre*? Are you ready to surrender?’

‘Why don’t you come a little closer and say that, you crummy little Frog?’

‘Tut, tut, *mon Général*. You really ought to learn French. That might help mask your barbaric sensibilities, *mais franchement, je m’en doute*.’ Smilingly, he looked around at his officers, who tittered appreciatively.

‘Perhaps you could teach me,’ Bartolomeo hollered back. ‘And I would instruct *you* in fighting, since you seem to do so little of it – at least, fair and

square, like a gentleman should.'

Valois smiled thinly. 'Hmm. Well, *cher ami*, as amusing as this little parley has been, I see I must repeat my request: I'd like your unconditional surrender by sunrise.'

'Come and get it. My Lady Bianca will whisper it in your ear.'

'Ah! I believe another lady might object to that.'

He nodded to his infantrymen, who pulled the sack off their prisoner. It was Pantasilea!

'*Il mio marito vi ammazzerà tutti*,' she spluttered defiantly, spitting pieces of hemp and dust. 'My husband will murder you all!'

It took Bartolomeo a moment to recover from the shock. Ezio grasped his arm, while his men looked at one another, aghast.

'I'll kill you, *fotutto Francese*!' he screamed.

'Dear me, calm down,' sneered Valois. 'For your wife's sake. And rest assured that no Frenchman would ever harm a woman – unnecessarily.' His tone became more businesslike. 'But even a dunderhead like you can imagine, I think, what will happen if you do not accede to my terms.' He kicked his horse's flanks and prepared to turn away. 'Come to my headquarters at dawn – unarmed – and bone up on a little French. Soon all Italy will be speaking it.'

He raised his hand. The infantrymen threw Pantasilea across the back of one of the officer's horses and the whole party cantered off, the infantry following in its wake.

'I'll get you, you *pezzo di merda figlio di puttana*!' Barlomeo shouted impotently after them. 'That whoreson piece of shit,' he muttered to Ezio before charging off.

'Where are you going?' Ezio yelled after him.

'To get her back!'

'Bartolomeo! Wait!'

But Bartolomeo ploughed on, and by the time Ezio caught up with him, he was in the saddle, ordering the gates to be opened.

'You can't do this alone,' pleaded Ezio.

'I'm not alone,' replied the *condottiero*, patting Bianca, which hung at his side. 'Come with me if you wish, but you'll have to hurry.' He spurred on his horse and headed for the now-open gates.

Ezio didn't even watch him go. He shouted brisk orders to Bartolomeo's Captain of Cavalry and, within minutes, he, Ezio and a mounted unit of *condottieri* were galloping out of the barracks in hot pursuit of their leader.

40

General de Valois's headquarters were situated within the ruins of the fortified ancient Roman barracks of the old emperors' personal brigade, the Praetorian Guard. It was located in the eighteenth *rione*, on the north-eastern edge of Rome, which was now outside the shrunken city Rome had become. In its heyday, 1500 years earlier, Rome was vast – the greatest city in the world by far – boasting one million inhabitants.

Ezio and his troop had caught up with Bartolomeo on the road, and now they were gathered together on a small rise near the French base camp. They'd attempted an attack, but their bullets had bounced uselessly off the strong modern walls de Valois had had built on top of the old ones. Now they had moved out of range of the responding hail of gunfire that had been the French response to their foray. All Bartolomeo could do was hurl imprecations at his enemies.

'You cowards! What, steal a man's wife and then go and hide inside a fortress? Hah! Nothing hangs between your thighs, do you hear me? *Nothing! Vous n'avez même pas une couille entre vous tous!* There, that good enough French for you, you *bastardi*? In fact, I don't think you have any balls at all.'

The French fired a cannon. They were within range of that and the shot hammered into the ground a few feet from where they were standing.

'Listen, Barto,' said Ezio. 'Calm down. You'll be no good to her dead. Let's re-group, then we'll storm the gates, just like we did at the Arsenale that time in Venice when we were chasing down Silvio Barbarigo.'

'It won't work,' said Bartolomeo glumly. 'The entrance is thicker with Frenchmen than the streets of Paris.'

'Then we'll climb the battlements.'

'They can't be scaled. And even if you could, you'd be so outnumbered, even *you* wouldn't be able to hold out.' He brooded. 'Pantasilea would know what to do.' He brooded some more, and Ezio could see that his friend was becoming positively despondent. 'Maybe this is the end,' he continued gloomily. 'I'll just have to do what he says: enter their camp at dawn, bearing propitiatory gifts, and just hope the sod spares her life. Wretched coward!'

Ezio had been thinking, and now he snapped his fingers excitedly. '*Perché non ci ho pensato prima*? Why didn't I think of it before?'

'What? Did I say something?'

Ezio's eyes were shining. 'Back to your barracks.'

'What?'

'Call your men back to barracks. I'll explain there. Come on!'

'This had better be good,' said Bartolomeo, giving his men the order, 'Fall back!'

It was night by the time they got back. Once the horses had been stabled and the men stood down, Ezio and Bartolomeo went to the map room and sat down in conference.

'So, what's this plan of yours?'

Ezio unrolled a map, which showed the Castra Praetoria and its surroundings in detail. He pointed inside the fortress.

'Once inside, your men can overpower the camp's patrols, am I correct?'

'Yes, but—'

'Especially if they are taken completely by surprise?'

'*Ma certo*. The element of surprise is always—'

'Then we need to get hold of a lot of French uniforms. And their armour. Fast. At dawn, we'll walk right in, bold as brass; but there's no time to lose.'

Comprehension dawned on Bartolomeo's rugged face – comprehension, and hope: 'Hah! You crafty old scoundrel! Ezio Auditore, you truly are a man after my own heart. And thinking worthy of my Pantasilea herself. *Magnifico!*'

'Give me a few men. I'm going to make a sortie to their tower now, get in, and fetch what we need.'

'I'll give you all the men you need; they can strip the uniforms from the dead French troops.'

'Good.'

'And Ezio.'

'Yes?'

'Be sure to kill them as cleanly as possible. We don't want uniforms covered in blood.'

'They won't feel a thing,' said Ezio. 'Trust me.'

As Bartolomeo was detailing men for the job in hand, Ezio collected his saddlebag, and from it selected the Poison Blade.

They rode silently up to the Borgia Tower, which the French commanded, their horses' hooves muffled with sacking. Dismounting a short way off, Ezio bade his men wait while he scaled the outer wall with the skill of a denizen of

the distant Alps and the grace and cunning of a cat. A scratch from the Poison Blade was enough to kill, and the over-confident French had not posted many guards – those that there were, he took completely unawares and they were dead before they even knew what had happened to them. Once the guards were out of the way, Ezio opened the main gate, which groaned on its hinges, making Ezio's heart race. He paused to listen, but the garrison slept on. Without a sound, his men ran into the tower, entered the garrison and overcame its inmates with barely a struggle. Collecting the uniforms took a little longer, but within an hour they were back at the barracks, mission accomplished.

'Bit of blood on this one,' grumbled Bartolomeo, sifting through their booty.

'He was the exception as he was the only man who was truly on his toes – I had to finish him the conventional way, with my sword,' said Ezio, as the men detailed for the operation ahead changed into the French uniform.

Bartolomeo said, 'Well, you'd better bring me a suit of their perverted mail, too.'

'You're not wearing one,' said Ezio, as he put on a French lieutenant's uniforms.

'What?'

'Of course you aren't! The plan is that you gave yourself up to us. We are a French patrol, bringing you to the Général Duc de Valois.'

'Of course.' Bartolomeo thought hard. 'Then what?'

'Barto, you can't have been paying attention. Then your men attack – on my signal.'

'*Bene!*' Bartolomeo beamed. 'Get a move on,' he said to those of his men who hadn't yet finished dressing. 'I can smell the dawn already, and it's a long ride.'

The men rode hard through the night, but left their horses at a little distance from the French HQ, in the charge of their squires. Before leaving them, Ezio first checked Leonardo's little Codex pistol – the design had been improved so he could fire more than one shot before reloading – and discreetly strapped it to his arm. He and his group of 'French' soldiers then proceeded on foot in the direction of Castra Praetoria.

'De Valois thinks Cesare will allow the French to rule Italy,' explained Bartolomeo as he and Ezio marched side by side. Ezio was playing the part of the senior officer of the patrol, and would hand Bartolomeo over himself. 'Silly fool! He's so blinded by the trickle of royalty in his blood that he can't see the plan of the battlefield – blasted little inbred runt that he is!' He paused. 'But you know and I know that, whatever the French may think, Cesare intends to be the first king of a united Italy.'

‘Unless we stop him.’

‘Yes.’ Bartolomeo reflected. ‘You know, brilliant though your plan is, personally I don’t like using this kind of trick. I believe in a fair fight – and may the best man win.’

‘Cesare and de Valois may have different styles, Barto, but they both fight dirty, and we have no choice but to fight fire with fire.’

‘Hmm! “There will come a day when men no longer cheat each other. And on that day we shall see what Mankind is truly capable of.” ’ he quoted.

‘I’ve heard that somewhere before.’

‘You should have! It’s something your father wrote.’

‘Psst!’

They had drawn close to the French encampment, and up ahead Ezio could see figures moving about – French perimeter guards.

‘What’ll we do?’ asked Bartolomeo, sotto voce.

‘I’ll kill them – there aren’t many of them – but we must do it noiselessly and without fuss.’

‘Got enough poison left in that gadget of yours?’

‘This lot are alert and they’re quite widely spaced apart. If I kill one and I’m noticed, I may not be able to prevent some getting back and raising the alarm.’

‘Why kill them at all? We’re in French uniforms. Well, you lot are.’

‘They’ll ask questions. If we make an entrance with you in chains …’

‘Chains?!’

‘Shh! If we make an entrance, de Valois will be so tickled it won’t occur to him to ask where we sprang from. At least, I hope it won’t.’

‘That chicken brain? No worries!’ But how are we going to get rid of them? We can hardly shoot them. The gunfire would be as good as a fanfare.’

‘I’m going to shoot them with this,’ said Ezio, producing Leonardo’s compact, quick-load crossbow. ‘I’ve counted. There are five of them and I have six bolts. The light’s still a bit dim for me to aim properly from here, so I’ll have to get a bit closer. Just you hang on here with the rest.’

Ezio slipped forward until he was within twenty paces of the nearest French sentry. Cranking back the string, he placed the first bolt in the groove and, lifting the tiller to his shoulder, took a quick bead on the man’s breast and fired. There was a muted snap and a hiss, and the man toppled to the ground instantly, like a puppet whose strings had been cut. Ezio was already on his way through the bracken to his next victim; the twang of the crossbow was barely audible. The small bolt hit the man’s throat, and he made a strangulated gargling sound before his knees gave way beneath him. Five minutes later, it was all over. Ezio had used all six bolts, since he’d missed on the first shot at his last man, causing him

to lose his resolve momentarily, but he'd reloaded and fired successfully before the soldier had had time to react to the strange, dull noise he'd heard.

He had no more ammunition for the bow now, but he gave silent thanks to Leonardo. He knew this weapon would prove more than useful on another occasion. Ezio quietly hauled the fallen French soldiers to some sparse cover, hoping it would be enough to hide them from anyone who happened to pass by. As he did so he retrieved the used bolts for another time – recalling Leonardo's advice – then, stowing the crossbow, made his way back to Bartolomeo.

'All done?' the big man asked him.

'All done.'

'Valois next,' Bartolomeo vowed. 'I'll make him squeal like a stuck pig.'

The sky was lightening, and dawn, clad in a russet mantle, was walking over the dew on the distant hills to the east.

'We'd better get going,' said Bartolomeo.

'Come on, then,' replied Ezio, clapping manacles on his wrists before he could object. 'Don't worry, they're spring-loaded fakes. Just make a sudden tight fist and they'll drop off. But for God's sake wait for my signal. And by the way, the "guard" just to your left will stay close to you. He's got Bianca under his cloak. All you have to do is reach across and …' Ezio's voice took on a warning note, 'But only *at my signal.*'

'Aye, aye, sir,' smiled Bartolomeo.

At the head of his men, Bartolomeo two paces behind him with a special escort of four, Ezio marched boldly in the direction of the main gate of the French headquarters. The rising sun glittered on their chain mail and breastplates.

'*Halte-là!*' ordered a sergeant-commander at the gate, who was backed up by a dozen heavily armed sentries. His eyes had already taken in the uniforms of his fellow soldiers so he ordered, '*Déclarez-vous!*'

'*Je suis le lieutenant Guillemot, et j'emmène le général d'Alviano ici présent à Son Excellence le Duc-Général Monsieur de Valois. Le général d'Alviano s'est rendu, seul et sans armes, selon les exigences de Monsieur le Duc,*' said Ezio fluently, causing Bartolomeo to raise an eyebrow.

'Well, Lieutenant Guillemot, the general will be pleased to see that General d'Alviano has come to his senses,' said the Captain of the Guard, who had hurried up to take charge. 'But there's something – just a trace – about your accent, which I cannot place. Tell me, what part of France are you from?'

Ezio drew a breath. 'Montréal,' he replied firmly.

'Open the gates,' the Captain of the Guard said to his sergeant.

'Open the gates!' shouted the sergeant.

Within seconds, Ezio was leading his men into the heart of the French headquarters. He fell back a step so as to have Bartolomeo, and the 'prisoner's' escort, at his side.

'I'll kill the lot of them,' muttered Bartolomeo, 'and eat their kidneys fried for breakfast. By the way, I didn't know you spoke French.'

'Picked it up in Florence,' Ezio replied casually. 'Couple of girls there I knew.' He was quietly glad his accent had passed muster.

'You rogue! Still, they say that's the best place to learn a language.'

'What, Florence?'

'No, you fool – *bed*!'

'Shut up.'

'You sure these manacles are fakes?'

'Not *yet*, Barto. Be patient, and shut up!'

'It's taking all my patience. What are they saying?'

'I'll tell you later.'

It was just as well that Bartolomeo's French was limited to a few words, thought Ezio, as he listened to the jibes being hurled at his friend: '*Chien d'Italien*' – 'Italian dog'; '*Prosterne-toi devant tes supérieurs*' – 'Bow down before your betters'; '*Regarde-le, comme il a honte de ce qu'il est devenu!*' – 'Look at him, how ashamed of himself he is at his own downfall!'

The ordeal was soon over, though, as they arrived at the foot of the broad stairway leading up to the entrance of the French general's quarters. De Valois himself stood at the head of a group of officers, his prisoner Pantasilea at his side. Her hands were tied behind her back, and she wore loose manacles on her ankles, which allowed her to walk, but only in small steps. At the sight of her, Bartolomeo could not resist an angry growl. Ezio kicked him.

De Valois held up his hand. 'No need for violence, Lieutenant, though I do congratulate you on your zeal.' He turned his attention to Bartolomeo. 'My dear general, it seems that you have seen the light.'

'Enough of your crap!' snarled Bartolomeo. 'Release my wife, and get these cuffs off me.'

'Oh dear,' said de Valois. 'Such high-handedness, and from someone born with absolutely nothing to his name.'

Ezio was about to give the signal, when Bartolomeo retorted to Valois, raising his voice, 'My name is worth its currency. Unlike yours, which is counterfeit!'

The surrounding troops fell silent.

'How dare you?' said de Valois, white with rage.

'You think that commanding an army in itself grants you status and nobility? True nobility of spirit comes from fighting alongside your men, not by

kidnapping a woman to cheat your way out of a battle.'

'You savages never learn,' said de Valois malevolently and, producing a pistol, he cocked it and pointed it at Pantasilea's head.

Ezio knew he had to act fast, so he took out a pistol and fired one shot into the air. At the same time, Bartolomeo, who'd been dying for this moment, bunched his fists so the manacles flew off.

Pandemonium followed. The disguised *condottieri* accompanying Ezio immediately attacked the startled French soldiers, and Bartolomeo, seizing Bianca from the 'guard' still on his left, bounded up the stairway. De Valois was too quick for him, though. Keeping a tight hold on Pantasilea, he backed into his quarters and slammed the door behind him.

'Ezio!' implored Bartolomeo. 'You have to save my wife. Only you can do it. That place is built like a strongbox.'

Ezio nodded and tried to give his friend a reassuring smile. He scanned the building from where he stood. It wasn't large, but it was a strong new structure, built by French military architects and designed to be impregnable. There was nothing for it but to try to gain entry from the rooftops, where no one would be expecting an assault, and where, therefore, the weak points *might* be.

Ezio leapt up the stairs and, taking advantage of the melee below, which was diverting everyone else's attention, he looked for a place to climb. Suddenly, a dozen Frenchmen started after him, keen swords flashing in the early morning sun, but in a flash Bartolomeo was standing between Ezio and them, flourishing Bianca menacingly.

The walls of de Valois's quarters might have been designed to be unassailable, but there were enough nooks and crannies in them for Ezio to be able to plot a route with his eyes, and within a couple of moments he was on the roof. It was flat and made of wood overlaid with tile, and there were five French sentries stationed there, who challenged him as he sprang over the parapet, demanding a password. When he could not give one, they ran towards him, halberds lowered. It was lucky they weren't armed with muskets or pistols! Ezio shot the first one, then drew his sword and gave battle to the other four; they put up a desperate struggle, surrounding and jabbing him mercilessly with the points of their weapons. One slashed his sleeve open, nicking his elbow and drawing blood, but the blade slid harmlessly off the metal Bracer on his left forearm.

Using the Bracer and his sword, he was able to defend himself against the increasingly frenetic blows. Ezio's skill with his blade was offset by having to tackle four opponents at once, but thoughts of Bartolomeo's beloved wife spurred him on – he knew that he could not fail; he must not fail. Eventually the tide of the fight turned in his favour; he ducked under two swords that were

slashing towards his head, and engaged another with his Bracer, leaving him free to smash aside the fourth man's blade. The manoeuvre gave him the opening he needed, and a lethal slash across the man's jaw felled him. Three to go. Ezio stepped close to the nearest Frenchman, inside his guard, which threw the man, giving him no room to wield his sword. He then flicked his Hidden Blade forward into the man's abdomen. Two left – both of whom were looking nervous. It took just a couple of minutes to defeat the remaining two French guards, who no longer had the advantage of numbers. Their swordplay was simply no competition for Ezio's mastery of the blade. Breathing heavily and leaning on his sword for a moment, Ezio stood in the midst of his five vanquished foes.

The roof gave way in its centre to a large square opening. After reloading his pistol, Ezio approached it cautiously. As he'd expected, he found himself looking down into a courtyard, undecorated and bare of any plants, chairs or tables, though there were two or three stone benches arranged around a dry fountain and pool.

As he looked over the edge, a shot cracked and a bullet zinged past his left ear, causing him to draw back. He didn't know how many pistols de Valois had. If only one, he calculated that it would take the General perhaps ten seconds to reload. He regretted the crossbow, but there was nothing to be done about that. Tucked into the back of his belt were five of the poison darts. But he'd have to be fairly close range to use them, and he didn't want to do anything to endanger Pantasilea.

'Don't come any nearer!' yelled de Valois from below. 'I'll kill her if you do.'

Ezio hovered near the edge, looking down into the courtyard, but his line of vision was limited by the rim of the roof. He could see no one down there, but he could sense the panic in de Valois's voice.

'Who are you?' the General called. 'Who sent you? Rodrigo? Tell him it was all Cesare's plan.'

'You'd better tell me all you know, if you want to get back to Burgundy in one piece.'

'If I tell you, will you let me go?'

We'll see. The woman must not be harmed. Come out where I can see you,' commanded Ezio.

Below him, de Valois stepped warily out from the colonnade that surrounded the courtyard and took up position near the dry fountain. Pantasilea's hands were tied behind her back, and he held her by a bridle which was attached to a halter round her neck. She had been crying, Ezio could see, but she was silent now and tried to keep her head held high. The look she gave de Valois was so withering

that, had it been a weapon, it would have eclipsed all the Codex armaments combined.

How many men were hidden down there with him, Ezio wondered? Though the fearful tone of his voice suggested that the general had run out of options and was feeling cornered.

‘Cesare has been bribing the cardinals to get them away from the Pope and onto his side. Once he had subdued the rest of the country for Rome, I was supposed to march on the capital and seize the Vatican, together with anyone else who opposed the Captain-General’s will.’

De Valois waved his pistol around wildly and, as he turned, Ezio saw that he had two more stuck in his belt.

‘It wasn’t my idea,’ continued de Valois. ‘I am above such scheming.’ A trace of the old vanity was creeping back into his voice. Ezio wondered if he’d allowed the man too much latitude. He moved into view and boldly leapt down into the courtyard, landing in a panther-like crouch.

‘Stay back!’ screamed de Valois. ‘Or I’ll—’

‘Harm one hair of her head and my archers above will fill you fuller of arrows than Santo Sebastiano,’ Ezio hissed. ‘So, you noble little soul, what was in it for you?’

‘As I am of the House of Valois, Cesare will give me Italy. I will rule here, as befits my birthright.’

Ezio almost laughed. Bartolomeo had not been exaggerating – quite the opposite – when he’d called this popinjay a chicken brain! But he still had Pantasilea, so he was still dangerous.

‘Good. Now, let the woman go.’

‘Get me out first. Then I’ll let her go.’

‘No.’

‘I have King Louis’s ear. Ask for what you want in France and it shall be yours. An estate, perhaps? A title?’

‘Those things I already have. Here. And you are never going to rule over them.’

‘The Borgia have tried to overturn the natural order,’ wheedled de Valois, changing tack. ‘I intend to set it right again. Royal blood should rule, not the foul, tainted stuff that runs in their veins.’ He paused. ‘I know you are not a barbarian, like them.’

‘Neither you, nor Cesare, nor the Pope, nor anyone who does not have peace and justice on his side will ever rule Italy while I have life in my body,’ said Ezio, moving slowly forward.

Fear seemed to have frozen the French General to the spot. The hand that now held the pistol to Pantasilea's temple, trembled, and he did not retreat. Evidently they were alone in his quarters, unless the only other occupants were servants who'd had the sense to hide. They could hear a steady, heavy noise, as of deliberate, slow blows being struck, and the outer doors of the quarters vibrated. Bartolomeo must have routed the French and brought up battering rams.

'Please …' quavered the General, all his urbanity gone. 'I will kill her.' He glanced up at the opening in the roof, trying to catch a glimpse of Ezio's imaginary archers, not even reflecting, as Ezio had feared he might when he'd first mentioned them, that such soldiery had been all but superseded in modern warfare, though the bow was still far quicker to reload than the pistol or musket.

Ezio took another step forward.

'I'll give you anything you want. There's money here, plenty of it; it's to pay my men with, but you may have it all. And I … I … I will do anything you want of me.' His voice was pleading now, and he cut such a pathetic figure that Ezio could barely bridle his contempt. This man actually saw himself as King of Italy!?

It hardly seemed worth killing him.

Ezio was close to him now and the two men looked each other in the eye. Ezio slowly took first the pistol, and then the bridle, out of the General's nerveless hands. With a whimper of relief, Pantasilea hobbled back out of the way, watching the scene with wide eyes.

'I … I only wanted respect,' said the General, faintly.

'But real respect is earned,' said Ezio, 'not inherited, or purchased. And it cannot be gained by force. "*Oderint dum Metuant*" must be one of the stupidest sayings ever coined. No wonder Caligula adopted it: "Let them hate, as long as they fear." No wonder our modern Caligula lives by the same saying. And you serve him!'

'I serve my King, Louis XII.' De Valois looked crestfallen. 'But perhaps you are right. I see that now.' Hope sparked in his eyes. 'I need more time …'

Ezio sighed. 'Alas, friend. You have run out of that.' He drew his sword as de Valois, understanding, and acting with dignity at last, knelt and lowered his head.

'*Requiescat in Pace*,' said Ezio.

With a mighty crash, the outer doors of de Valois's quarters splintered and fell open, revealing Bartolomeo, dusty and bloody but uninjured, standing at the head of a troop of his men. He rushed up to his wife and hugged her so tightly he knocked the breath out of her, before busying himself about getting the halter off her neck; his fingers were so nervous and clumsy that Ezio had to do it for him.

He cut the manacles from her feet with two mighty blows of Bianca, and, calmer now, untied the cords that bound her wrists.

‘Oh, Pantasilea, my love, my heart, my own. Don’t you ever dare disappear like that again. I was lost without you.’

‘No you weren’t. You rescued me.’

‘Ah,’ Bartolomeo looked embarrassed. ‘No. Not I – it was Ezio! He came up with a—’

‘*Madonna*, I am glad you are safe,’ interrupted Ezio.

‘My dear Ezio, how can I thank you? You saved me.’

‘I was but an instrument, just a part of your husband’s brilliant plan.’

Bartolomeo looked at Ezio with an expression of confusion and gratitude on his face.

‘My prince!’ said Pantasilea, embracing her husband. ‘My hero!’

Bartolomeo blushed and winked at Ezio, saying, ‘Well, if I’m your prince, I’d better earn that title. Mind you, it wasn’t *all* my idea, you know.’

As they turned to go, Pantasilea brushed by Ezio and whispered, ‘Thank you.’

41

A few days later, after Bartolomeo had rounded up the remains of de Valois's dispirited army, Ezio fell in with La Volpe, both on their way to a convocation Ezio had ordered of the Brotherhood at the Assassin hideaway on Tiber Island.

'How do things stand now here in Rome?' was Ezio's first question.

'Very good, Ezio. With the French army in disarray, Cesare has lost important support. Your sister Claudia tells us that the Spanish and the Holy Roman ambassadors have left hurriedly for home, and my men have routed the *Cento Occhi*.'

'There is still much to do.'

They arrived at their destination and found the rest of their companions already gathered in the inner room of the hideout, where a fire blazed on a hearth in the middle of the floor.

After they had greeted each other and taken their places, Machiavelli stood and intoned in Arabic, *'Laa shay'a waqi'un moutlaq bale kouloun moumkine'* – the Wisdom of our Creed is revealed through these words – 'We work in the Dark, to serve the Light. We are Assassins.'

Then Ezio stood and turned to his sister: 'Claudia. We dedicate our lives to protecting the freedom of Humanity. Mario Auditore, and our father Giovanni, his brother, once stood at a similar fire to this one, engaged in the same task. Now, I offer the choice to you: of joining us.'

He extended his hand and she placed hers in his. Machiavelli withdrew from the fire the familiar branding iron ending in two small semicircles like the letter 'C', which could be brought together by means of a lever in the handle.

'Everything is permitted. Nothing is true,' he said gravely. The others – Bartolomeo, La Volpe and Ezio – repeated the words after him.

Just as Antonio de Magianis had once done to Ezio, so Machiavelli now solemnly applied the branding iron to Claudia's ring finger and closed the clamp, so that the mark of a ring was burnt there forever.

Claudia winced, but did not cry out. Machiavelli removed the iron and put it safely to one side.

'Welcome to our Order – our Brotherhood,' he told Claudia formally.

‘Sisterhood too?’ she asked, rubbing a soothing ointment onto her branded finger from a little phial Bartolomeo had proffered her.

Machiavelli smiled. ‘If you like.’

All eyes were on him now as he turned to Ezio.

‘We have not seen eye to eye on many issues—’

‘Niccolò—’ Ezio interrupted, but Machiavelli held up a hand to stay him.

‘But ever since the epiphany in the vault under the Sistine Chapel, and even before then, you have proved again and again that you were exactly what our order needed. You have led the charge against the Templars, carried our *gonfalon* proud and high, and steadily rebuilt our Brotherhood after the debacle at Monteriggioni.’ He looked around. ‘The moment has come, my friends, to appoint formally Ezio to the position he already occupies by common consent: that of our Leader. I present to you Ezio Auditore di Firenze, the Grand Master of our order.’ He turned to Ezio. ‘My friend, from henceforth you will be known as *il Mentore*, the guardian of our Brotherhood and of our secrets.’

Ezio’s head swam with emotion, though a part of him still wanted to wrench itself away from this life which demanded every waking hour and allowed few even for sleep. Still, he stepped forward and austerely repeated the words central to the Creed: ‘Where other men are limited by morality and law, we must, in quest of our sacred goals, always remember: Everything is permitted. Nothing is true. Nothing is true. Everything is permitted.’

The others repeated the formula after him.

‘And now it is time,’ said Machiavelli, ‘for our newest member to take her leap of faith.’

They made their way to the church of Santa Maria in Cosmedin and climbed its bell tower. Carefully guided by Bartolomeo and La Volpe, Claudia fearlessly threw herself into the void just as the golden orb of the sun broke free of the eastern horizon, catching the folds in her silver dress in its light and turning them golden too. Ezio watched her land safely and walk with Bartolomeo and La Volpe in the direction of a nearby colonnade. Now Machiavelli and Ezio were left alone. Just as Machiavelli was about to make his leap, Ezio stopped him.

‘Why the sudden change of heart, Niccolò?’

Machiavelli smiled. ‘What change of heart? I have always stood by you. I have always been loyal to the cause. My fault is independent thinking. That is what caused the doubts in your mind – and in Gilberto’s. Now we are free of all that unpleasantness. I never sought the leadership. I am … more of an observer. Now, let us take our leap of faith together, as friends and fellow warriors of the Creed!’

Machiavelli held out his hand and, smiling, Ezio took it firmly in his grasp. Then they threw themselves off the roof of the *campanile* together.

Scarcely had they landed and rejoined their companions than a courier rode up. Breathless, he announced, '*Maestro* Machiavelli, Cesare has returned to Rome alone from his latest foray in the Romagna. He rides for the Castel Sant'Angelo.'

'*Grazie*, Alberto,' said Machiavelli, as the courier wheeled his horse round and sped back the way he had come.

'Well?' Ezio asked him.

Machiavelli showed his palms. 'The decision is yours, not mine.'

'Niccolò, you had better not stop telling me what you think. I now seek the opinion of my most trusted advisor.'

Machiavelli smiled. 'In this case you know my opinion already. It hasn't changed. The Borgia must be eradicated. Go, and kill them, *Mentore*. Finish the job you have started.'

'Good advice.'

'I know,' Machiavelli looked at him appraisingly.

'What is it?' Ezio asked.

'I had been thinking of writing a book about Cesare's methods. Now, I think I will balance it with an examination of yours.'

'If you're writing a book about me,' said Ezio, 'better make it a short one!'

42

Ezio arrived at the Castel Sant'Angelo to find that a crowd had gathered on the opposite bank of the Tiber. Blending in with the gathered masses, he made his way to the front, and saw that the French troops guarding the bridge that led to the Castel, and the Castel itself, were in total disarray. Some soldiers were already packing up their equipment, while officers and lieutenants moved frantically among them, issuing orders to unpack again. Some of the orders were contradictory, and, as a result, here and there fights had broken out. The Italian crowd was watching, Ezio noted, with quiet pleasure. Though he carried his own clothes in a satchel slung over his shoulder, Ezio had taken the precaution of once more donning the French uniform he had worn in the attack on Castra Praetoria, and he now shed the cloak he'd been wearing to cover it, and walked quickly onto the bridge. No one paid him any attention, but as he passed among the French troops, he gleaned useful snippets of conversation.

'When are we expecting the attack from d'Alviano and his mercenaries?'

'They say he's on his way now.'

'Then why are we packing? Are we retreating?'

'I hope so! *Tout cela, c'est rien qu'un tas de merde*.'

A private spotted Ezio. 'Sir! Sir! What are our orders?'

'I'm on my way to see,' replied Ezio.

'Sir!'

'What is it?'

'Who's in charge now, sir? Now that General de Valois is dead?'

'No doubt the King is sending a replacement.'

'Is it true, sir, that he died valorously in battle?'

Ezio smiled to himself. 'Of course it's true. At the head of his men.'

He moved on towards the Castel itself.

Once inside, he found his way up to the ramparts, and from his vantage point looked down to the courtyard, where he spotted Cesare talking to a captain of the Papal Guard who was posted at the door of the inner citadel.

'I need to see the Pope!' Cesare said urgently. 'I need to see my father *now*!'

‘Of course, Your Grace. You will find His Holiness in his private apartments at the top of the Castel.’

‘Then get out of my way, you fool!’ Cesare thrust past the hapless captain as the latter gave hasty orders for a wicket gate in the main door to be opened to admit him. Ezio watched for a moment, then made his way around the circumference of the Castel until he came to the place where the secret gate was located. He dropped to the ground and let himself through with Pietro’s key.

Once inside, he looked around warily, then, seeing no one, he dived down a stairway in the direction of the cells from which he’d rescued Caterina Sforza. Finding a quiet spot, he swiftly shed the French lieutenant’s uniform and changed back into his own clothes, which were designed for the work he had to do. He checked his weapons quickly, strapping on the Bracer and the Poison Blade, and checking that he had a supply of poison darts safely stowed in his belt. Then, hugging the walls, he made off in the direction of the stairway that led to the top of the Castel. The way was guarded and he had to send three soldiers to their Maker before he could proceed.

At last he arrived at the garden where he had watched Lucrezia and her lover keep their tryst. In daylight he could see that her apartments were part of a complex. Larger and even grander ones stood beyond, and he guessed these to be the Pope’s. But as he was making off in that direction he was interrupted by a conversation coming from within Lucrezia’s rooms. He made his way stealthily to the open window, where the voices were coming from, and listened. He could just see Lucrezia, apparently none the worse for wear after her ordeal in the cells, talking to the same attendant he’d seen her entrust with the information about her affair with Pietro, which he had passed on to her jealous brother, with evident success to judge by Cesare’s fast return to Rome.

‘I don’t understand it,’ Lucrezia was saying irritably. ‘I ordered a fresh batch of cantarella only last night. Toffana was to have delivered it to me personally by noon. Did you see her? What’s going on?’

‘I’m terribly sorry, *mia signora*, but I’ve just heard that the Pope intercepted the delivery. He’s taken it all for himself.’

‘That old bastard. Where is he?’

‘In his rooms. *Madonna*, There’s a meeting—’

‘A meeting? With whom?’

The attendant hesitated. ‘With Cesare, *Madonna*.’

Lucrezia took this in, then said, half to herself, ‘That’s strange. My father didn’t tell me Cesare was back here again.’

Deep in thought, she left the room.

Alone, the attendant started to tidy up, rearranging tables and chairs and muttering under his breath.

Ezio waited a moment to see if there would be any more useful information imparted, but all the attendant said was, ‘That woman gives me so much trouble … Why didn’t I stay in the stables, where I was well off? Call this promotion?! I put my head on the block every time I run an errand. *And* I have to taste her food for her every time she sits down to a bloody meal.’ He paused for a moment. Then added, ‘What a family!’

43

Ezio left before he heard those last words. He slipped through the garden towards the Pope's apartments and, since the single entrance was heavily guarded and he did not want to draw attention to himself – it wouldn't be long before the bodies of the guards he'd killed below stairs were discovered – he found a place where he could climb up to one of the principal windows of the building unobtrusively. His hunch that this would be a window giving on to the Pope's chamber paid off, and it had a broad external sill where he could perch at one end whilst remaining out of sight. Using the blade of his dagger, he was able to prise a side light open a fraction so that he could hear anything that might be said inside.

Rodrigo – Pope Alexander VI – was alone in the room, standing by a table on which lay a large silver bowl of red and yellow apples, whose position he adjusted nervously as the door opened and Cesare entered, unannounced. He was clearly angry, and without preamble, he launched into a bitter diatribe.

'What the hell is going on?' he began.

'I don't know what you mean,' replied his father with reserve.

'Oh yes you do. My funds have been cut off and my troops dispersed.'

'Ah. Well, you know that after your banker's tragic … demise, Agostino Chigi took over all his affairs …'

Cesare laughed mirthlessly. '*Your* banker! I might have known. And my men?'

'Financial difficulties strike all of us from time to time, my boy, even those of us with armies and overweening ambition.'

'Are you going to get Chigi to release money to me or not?'

'No.'

'We'll see about that!' Angrily, Cesare snatched an apple from the bowl. Ezio saw that the Pope was watching his son carefully.

'Chigi won't help you,' said the Pope levelly. 'And he's too powerful for you to bend him to your will.'

'In that case,' said Cesare, sneering, 'I'll use the Piece of Eden to get what I want. It will render your help unnecessary.' He bit into the apple with a mean

smile.

‘That has been made abundantly clear to me already,’ said the Pope drily. ‘By the way, I suppose you are aware that General de Valois is dead?’

Cesare’s smile disappeared in a flash. ‘No. I have only just returned to Rome.’ His tone became threatening. ‘Did you … ?’

The Pope spread his hands. ‘What possible reason would I have had to kill him? Or was he plotting against me, perhaps, with my own, dear, brilliant, *treacherous* Captain-General?’

Cesare took another bite of the apple. ‘I do not have to stand for this!’ he snarled as he chewed.

‘If you must know, the Assassins murdered him.’

Cesare swallowed, his eyes wide. Then his face went dark with fury. ‘Why did you not stop them?’

‘As if I could.’ It was your decision to attack Monteriggioni, not mine. It’s high time you took responsibility for your misdeeds – if it’s not too late.’

‘My *actions*, you mean,’ replied Cesare proudly. ‘Despite the constant interference of failures like you.’

The younger man turned to go, but the Pope hurried round the table to block his way to the door.

‘You’re not going anywhere,’ Rodrigo growled. ‘And you are deluded. *I* have the Piece of Eden.’

‘Liar. Get out of my way, you old fool.’

The Pope shook his head sadly. ‘I gave you everything I could, and yet it was never enough.’

At that instant, Ezio saw Lucrezia burst into the room, her eyes wild.

‘Cesare!’ she shrieked. ‘Be careful! He intends to poison you!’

Cesare froze. He looked at the apple in his hand, spitting out the chunk he had just bitten, his face a mask. Rodrigo’s own expression changed from one of triumph to one of fear. He backed away from his son, putting the table between them.

‘Poison me?’ said Cesare, his eyes boring into his father’s.

‘You would not … listen to reason,’ stammered the Pope.

Cesare smiled as he advanced, very deliberately, on Rodrigo, saying, ‘Father. Dear Father. Do you not see? I control everything. *All* of it. If I want to live, despite your efforts, I shall live. And if there is anything – *anything* – I want, I take it.’ He came close to the Pope and seized him by the collar, raising the poisoned apple in his hand. ‘For example, if I want you to die, you *die*!’

Pulling his father close he shoved the apple into his open mouth before he had time to close it and, grabbing him by the head and jaw, forced his lips together

and held them shut. Rodrigo struggled and choked on the apple, unable to breathe. He fell to the floor in agony and his two children coldly watched him die.

Cesare wasted no time and, kneeling, searched his dead father's robes. There was nothing. He stood and bore down on his sister, who shrank from him.

'You … you must seek help. The poison is in you,' she cried.

'Not enough,' he barked hoarsely. 'Do you really think I am such a fool as not to have taken a prophylactic antidote before coming here? I know what a devious old toad our father was, and how he would react if he thought for a moment that real power was slipping in my direction. Now, he said he had the Piece of Eden.'

'He … he … was telling the truth.'

Cesare slapped her. 'Why was I not told?'

'You were away … he had it moved … he feared the Assassins might—'

Cesare slapped her again. 'You plotted with him!'

'No! No! I thought he had sent messengers to tell you.'

'Liar!'

'I am telling the truth. I really thought you knew, or at least had been informed, of what he'd done.'

Cesare slapped her again, harder this time, so that she lost her balance and fell.

'Cesare,' she said as she struggled for breath, panic and fear in her eyes, 'are you mad? I am Lucrezia. Your sister. Your friend. Your lover. Your queen.' Rising, she put her hands timidly to his cheeks to stroke them. But Cesare's response was to grab her round the throat and shake her, as a terrier shakes a ferret.

'You're nothing but a bitch.' He brought his face close to hers, thrusting it at her aggressively. 'Now tell me,' he continued, his voice dangerously low. 'Where is it?'

Disbelief showed in her voice when she replied, gagging as she struggled to speak, 'You … never loved me?'

His response was to let go of her throat and hit her again, this time close to the eye, with a closed fist.

'Where is the Apple? THE APPLE!' he screamed. 'Tell me!'

She spat in his face and he took her arm and threw her to the floor, kicking her hard as he repeated his question over and over again. Ezio tensed, forcing himself not to intervene – after all, he had to know the answer – though he was appalled at what he was witnessing.

'All right. All right,' she said at last, in a broken voice.

He pulled her to her feet and she placed her lips close to his ear, whispering, to Ezio's fury.

Satisfied, Cesare pushed her away. 'Smart decision, little sister.' She tried to cling to him, but he pushed her away with a gesture of disgust and strode from the room.

As soon as he had gone, Ezio smashed through the window and landed close to Lucrezia who, the spirit drained from her, slumped against the wall. Ezio quickly knelt by Rodrigo's inert body and felt for a pulse.

There was none.

'*Requiescat in Pace*,' whispered Ezio, rising again and confronting Lucrezia. Looking at him she smiled bitterly, a little of the fire returned to her eyes at the sight of him.

'You were there? All the time?'

Ezio nodded.

'Good,' she said. 'I know where the bastard is going.'

'Tell me.'

'With pleasure. Saint Peter's. The pavilion in the courtyard.'

'Thank you, *Madonna*.'

'Ezio.'

'Yes?'

'Be careful.'

44

Ezio raced along the Passetto di Borgo, which ran through the *rione* of Borgo and connected the Castel Sant'Angelo with the Vatican. He wished he'd been able to bring some of his men with him, or that he'd had time to find a horse, but urgency lent his feet wings, and any guards he encountered were swiftly thrown aside in his headlong rush.

Once in the Vatican, Ezio made his way to the pavilion in the courtyard, where Lucrezia had indicated the Apple would be. With Rodrigo gone, there was a fair chance that there would be a new Pope on whom the Borgia could have no influence, since the College of Cardinals, apart from those members who'd been well and truly bought, were fed up and disgusted at being pushed around by this foreign family.

But for now Ezio had to stop Cesare, before he could get hold of the Apple and use its power – however dimly he might understand it – to regain all the ground he had lost.

Now was the time to strike his enemy down for good – it was now or never.

Ezio reached the courtyard only to find it deserted. He noticed that at its centre there was, instead of a fountain, a large sandstone sculpture of a pine cone in a stone cup on a plinth. It stood perhaps ten feet high. He scanned the rest of the sunlit courtyard, but it was bare, with a dusty white floor that burnt his eyes with its brightness. There wasn't even a colonnade, and the walls of the surrounding buildings had no decoration at all, though there were rows of narrow windows high up and, at ground level, one plain door on each side, all of which were closed. It was an unusually austere place.

He looked again at the pine cone and approached it. Looking closely, he could just discern a narrow gap between the dome of the cone and its body, running round the whole circumference. Climbing up the plinth, he found he was able to steady himself by gripping with his toes and, holding on with one hand, he ran the other round the rim of the cone where the gap was, feeling carefully for any possibly imperfection that might disclose a hidden trigger or button.

There! He'd found it. Gently, he pressed it, and the top of the cone sprang open on hitherto hidden bronze hinges, firmly screwed into the soft stone and

strengthened with cement. In the centre of the hollow space that was now revealed, he saw a dark green leather bag. He fumbled at its drawstring with his hand, and the faint glow he saw within its depths confirmed his hopes; he had found the Apple!

His heart was in his mouth as he carefully lifted the bag free – he knew the Borgia, and there was no guarantee that it might not be booby-trapped, but he had to take that risk.

Where the hell was Cesare? The man had had a good few minutes' start on him, and had doubtless ridden here on horseback.

'I'll take that,' cried a cold, cruel voice behind him. Bag in hand, Ezio dropped lightly to the ground and turned to confront Cesare, who had just burst through the southern wall door, followed by a troop of his personal guard, who fanned out round the courtyard, surrounding Ezio.

Of course, Ezio thought, he hadn't reckoned on competition so had wasted time collecting backup.

'Beat you to it,' he taunted Cesare.

'It won't do you any good, Ezio Auditore. You've been a thorn in my side too long. But it ends here. Now. My sword will take your life.'

He drew a modern schiavona with a basket hilt and took a step towards Ezio. But then, suddenly, he turned grey and clasped his stomach, dropping his sword as his knees buckled. Evidently it had not been a strong enough antidote, thought Ezio, breathing a sigh of relief.

'Guards!' croaked Cesare, struggling to stay on his feet.

There were ten of them, five armed with muskets. Ezio ducked and dived as they fired at him, the balls from their muskets cannoning into the floor and walls as Ezio skittered to cover behind a pillar. Whisking out the poison darts from his belt, he sprang from his cover, drawing close enough to the musketeers to hurl the darts one by one. Cesare's men weren't expecting an assault, and looked at each other in surprise. Ezio threw his darts, and each one found its fatal mark. Within seconds, three guards were down, the poison in the darts quickly having mortal effect.

One of the musketeers regained his composure for a moment and hurled his weapon like a club, but Ezio ducked and the weapon went spiralling over his head. He quickly loosed the next two darts, until the musketeers were all down. Ezio had no time to retrieve his darts as Leonardo had suggested.

The five swordsmen, after recovering from their initial shock – for they'd assumed that their comrades with guns would have made short work of the Assassin – closed in quickly, wielding heavy falchions. Ezio almost danced among them as he avoided their clumsy blows – the swords were too heavy for

fast work or much manoeuvrability – releasing the newly recrafted Poison Blade and drawing his dagger. Ezio knew he didn't have much time to engage the soldiers before Cesare made a move, so his fighting technique was more sparse and efficient than usual, preferring to lock his opponents' blade with his dagger and use the Poison Blade to finish the job. The first two fell without a whisper, at which point the remaining three decided to attack all at once. Ezio pulled back five quick paces and extended his dagger up full and high, charging forward at the nearest of the three oncoming guards. As he drew into range, Ezio skidded to his knees, sliding across the ground and under the blade of one baffled guard. The Poison Blade nicked the man's thigh as Ezio skidded past, barrelling towards the remaining guards, while his dagger slashed at the tendons of their lower legs. Both men shrieked as Ezio's blade found its target and the men fell, their legs useless.

Cesare watched all this in quiet disbelief, and as Ezio careened towards the last three guards, Cesare decided not to wait for the outcome of the fight. He recovered himself enough to turn and flee.

Hemmed in by the guards and unable to follow, Ezio watched him go out of the corner of his eye.

No matter, though, for he still had the Apple, and he remembered enough of its power – how could he forget? – to use it, after the melee was over, to guide him back through the Vatican by a different route from that by which he'd come, reckoning, as he did, that Cesare would have wasted no time in securing the Passetto di Borgo. Glowing from within the leather bag, the Apple indicated on its surface a way through the high painted halls and chambers of the offices of the Vatican towards the Sistine Chapel, and thence by a southward-leading corridor into St Peter's itself. Its power was such that passing monks and priests within the Vatican turned away from Ezio, avoiding him, and Papal guards remained rigidly at their posts.

Ezio wondered how soon news of the Pope's death would filter down through the hierarchy of the Vatican. The confusion that would follow in its wake would need a strong hand to control it, and he prayed that Cesare would not have the opportunity to take advantage of any uncertainty to stake his own claim, if not to the Papacy – surely that was out of his reach – then to influencing the election in order to place a new Pope, friendly to his ambitions, on St Peter's throne.

Passing young Michelangelo's brilliant new sculpture of the Pietà on his left, Ezio left the basilica and blended into the crowds milling about in the shabby old square that lay in front of the east entrance.

45

By the time he reached the Assassin hideout on Tiber Island, church bells had begun to ring out all over Rome. They were sounding the Pope's death knell.

He found his friends waiting for him.

'Rodrigo is dead,' he announced.

'We guessed as much from the bells,' said Machiavelli. 'Magnificent work!'

'It was not by my hand, but Cesare's.'

It took a moment for this to sink in. Then Machiavelli spoke again: 'And what of Cesare?'

'He lives, though the Pope tried to poison him before he died.'

'The serpent is biting its own tail,' said La Volpe.

'Then the day is saved!' cried Claudia.

'No.' said Machiavelli. 'If he's freed himself of the restraint of his father, Cesare may yet regain the ground he has lost. We must not allow him to assemble his remaining supporters. The coming weeks will be critical.'

'With your aid I will hunt him down,' said Ezio firmly.

'Niccolò is right; we must act fast,' La Volpe put in. 'Do you hear those trumpets? They are a summons to the Borgia forces to gather.'

'Do you know where?' asked Bartolomeo.

'It's likely that they'll rally their troops in the piazza in front of Cesare's palace in Trastevere.'

'My men will patrol the city,' said Bartolomeo, 'but we'd need a full army to do it properly.'

Ezio carefully produced the Apple from its bag. It glowed dully. 'We have one,' he said. 'Or something just as good.'

'Do you know how to use it?' asked Machiavelli.

'I remember enough from when Leonardo experimented with it long ago in Venice,' replied Ezio. He held the strange artefact aloft and, concentrating, tried to project his thoughts at it.

There was no response for several minutes, and he was about to give up when, slowly at first, and then with increasing energy, the Apple began to glow more and more brightly, until the light emanating from it made them cover their eyes.

‘Stand back!’ bawled Bartolomeo as Claudia gasped in alarm, and even La Volpe started back.

‘No,’ said Machiavelli. ‘Science – but something out of our reach.’ He looked at Ezio. ‘If only Leonardo were here.’

‘As long as it serves our purpose,’ said Ezio.

‘Look,’ said La Volpe. ‘It’s showing us the *campanile* of Santa Maria in Trastevere. That’s where Cesare must be.’

‘You were right,’ cried Bartolomeo. ‘But look at the number of troops he still has.’

‘I’m going. Now,’ said Ezio, as the projected scene faded and the Apple became inert.

‘We’re coming with you.’

‘No.’ Ezio held up a hand. ‘Claudia, I want you to go back to The Rosa in Fiore and get your girls to find out all they can about Cesare’s plans, then mobilize our recruits. Gilberto, get your thieves to fan out all over the city and bring word of any Templar chapters that may be reorganizing. Our enemies are fighting for their very lives. Bartolomeo, organize your men and have them ready to move at a moment’s notice.’

He turned to Machiavelli. ‘Niccolò. Get over to the Vatican. The College of Cardinals will be going into conclave soon to elect a new Pope.’

‘Indeed. And Cesare will certainly try to use what influence he has left to elevate a candidate favourable to him to the Papal Throne – or at least someone he can manipulate.’

‘But Cardinal della Rovere wields great authority now, and he is the Borgia’s implacable enemy, as you know. If only—’

‘I will go and talk to the Cardinal *Camerlengo*. The election may be long and drawn out.’

‘We must take every advantage we can of the interregnum. Thank you, Niccolò.’

‘How will you manage on your own, Ezio?’

‘I’m not on my own,’ said Ezio, gently replacing the Apple in its bag. ‘I’m taking this with me.’

‘Just as long as you know how to keep it under control,’ said Bartolomeo mistrustfully. ‘If you ask me, it’s a creation straight out of Beelzebub’s workshop.’

‘In the wrong hands, perhaps. But as long as we have it—’

‘Then don’t let it out of your sight, let alone your grasp.’

They broke up then, each hastening away to attend to the duties Ezio had assigned them. Ezio himself crossed to the west bank of the river and sprinted

the short distance to the church La Volpe had recognized in the vision accorded them by the Apple.

The scene had changed by the time he reached it, though he saw units of soldiers in Cesare's livery making their way out of the square in organized groups, as if under orders. These were disciplined men who understood that failure would spell their ruin.

There was no sign of Cesare, but Ezio knew that he must still be sick from the effects of the poison. His rallying call to the troops must have taken it out of him. There was only one place he would think of retreating to: his fortified *palazzo*, not far away. Ezio set off in its direction.

He blended in with a group of Borgia attendants who wore Cesare's personal crest on the shoulders of their cloaks. They were too agitated to have noticed him, even if he hadn't been using the Apple to render himself as good as invisible. Using the guards as cover, he slipped through the palazzo's gates, which opened quickly for them and then, just as quickly, clanged shut again behind them.

Ezio slipped into the shadows of the courtyard's colonnade and glided along the perimeter of the inner walls, stopping to peer in at each unshuttered window. Then, ahead, he saw a door with two guards posted outside it. He looked around. The rest of the courtyard was deserted. He approached silently, releasing his Hidden Blade, and fell upon the guards before they knew what was happening. One, he killed instantly. The other managed to get a blow in, which would have severed his left hand from his arm had it not been for the Bracer. While the man recovered from his astonishment at what appeared to be witchcraft, Ezio plunged the Blade into the base of his throat, and he fell like a sack to the ground.

The door was unlocked and its hinges, when Ezio warily tried them, proved well-oiled, so that he could slide into the room noiselessly.

It was large and gloomy. Ezio took refuge behind an arras near the door, set there to exclude draughts, and watched the men seated around a large oak table at its centre. The table was spread with papers and illuminated by candles in two iron candelabra. At its head sat Cesare, his personal doctor, Gaspar Torella, at his side. His face was grey and he was sweating prodigiously as he glared at his officers.

'You must hunt them down,' he was saying, grasping the arms of his chair tightly in an effort to stay upright.

'They are everywhere and nowhere at once,' declared one helplessly.

'I don't care how you do it, just do it!'

'We cannot, *signore*, not without your guidance. The Assassins have regrouped. With the French gone, or in disarray, our own forces are scarcely able

to match them. They have spies everywhere, and our own network is no longer able to root them out. Ezio Auditore has turned vast numbers of the citizenry to his cause.'

'I am ill, *idioti*! I depend on your initiative.' Cesare sighed, falling back in his chair. 'I was damned nearly killed, but I still have teeth.'

'Sir …'

'Just hold them at bay, if that's the best you can do.' Cesare paused to catch his breath, and Doctor Torella mopped his brow with a lint cloth soaked in vinegar, or some other strong-smelling astringent, muttering soothingly to his patient as he did so. 'Soon,' Cesare continued, 'Soon, Micheletto will reach Rome with my own forces from Romagna and the north, and then you will see how quickly the Assassins will crumble into dust.'

Ezio stepped forth and revealed the Apple. 'You delude yourself, Cesare,' he said in a voice of true authority.

Cesare started from his chair, fear in his eyes. 'You! How many lives do you have, Ezio? But this time you will surely die. Call the guard! Now!' he bellowed at his officers as he allowed his doctor to hurry him from the room to safety through an inner door.

Lightning-fast, one of the officers made for the door to raise the alarm while the others drew pistols and levelled them at Ezio, who just as swiftly withdrew the Apple from its bag and held it aloft, concentrating hard and pulling the hood of his tunic down low to shield his eyes.

The Apple began to pulsate and glow, and the glow turned to an incandescence that gave out no heat, but which was as bright as the sun. The room turned white.

'What sorcery is this?' shouted one of the officers, firing wildly. By chance his shot hit the Apple, but it had no more effect on it than a handful of dust.

'Truly, this man has God Himself on his side!' another bawled, vainly trying to shield his eyes and staggering blindly in what he thought he thought was the direction of the door.

As the light increased, the officers blundered up against the table, covering their eyes with their hands.

'What's happening?'

'How is this possible?'

'Do not smite me, Lord!'

'I cannot *see*!'

His lips pressed together in concentration, Ezio continued to project his will through the Apple, but even he dared not look up from under the protecting peak of his cowl. He had to judge the moment to cease. When he did so, a wave of

exhaustion hit him as the Apple, invisible within its own light, suddenly went dead. There was no sound in the room. Cautiously, Ezio lifted his hood and saw that the room was almost as it was before. The candles on the table cast a pool of light at the centre of the gloom, burning on, almost reassuringly, as if nothing had happened. Their flames were steady, as there was no hint of a breeze.

The tapestry on the arras was bleached of all its colour, and all the officers lay dead around the table, save the one who had first been making for the door; he was slumped against it, his hand still on the latch. Ezio went over to him and had to move him aside in order to leave.

As he rolled the man over, he inadvertently looked into his eyes. He wished he hadn't – it was a sight he would never forget.

'*Requiescat in Pace*,' said Ezio, acknowledging the chill realization that the Apple did indeed have powers which, if unleashed without check, could control the minds of men and open up undreamed-of possibilities and worlds.

It could wreak destruction so terrible as to be beyond the power of imagination itself.

46

The conclave was undecided. Despite the efforts of Cardinal della Rovere to outwit him, Cesare clearly still had enough clout to hold him in check. Fear, or self-interest, kept the cardinals wavering. Machiavelli guessed what they were trying to do – they would find a candidate to elect who might not last long, but who would be acceptable to all parties. An interim Pope, if you like a caretaker until the balance of power resolved itself.

Bearing this in mind, Ezio was pleased when, after weeks of deadlock, Claudia brought news to Tiber Island.

'The Cardinal of Rouen – a Frenchman, Georges d'Amboise – has revealed under … duress … that Cesare has planned a meeting with Templar loyalists in the countryside, outside Rome. The cardinal himself attends.'

'When is it?'

'Tonight.'

'Where?'

'The location is to be kept secret until the last minute.'

'Then I will go to the cardinal's residence and follow him when he leaves.'

'They have elected a new Pope,' said Machiavelli, coming in hurriedly. 'Your pet French cardinal, Claudia, will take the news to Cesare tonight. In fact, a small delegation of them, still friendly to the Borgia, is going with him.'

'Who is the new Pope?' asked Ezio

Machiavelli smiled. 'It is as I thought,' he said. 'Cardinal Piccolomini. He's not an old man – he's sixty-four – but he's in poor health. He's chosen to be known as Pius III.'

'Whom does he support?'

'We don't know yet, but all the foreign ambassadors put pressure on Cesare to leave Rome during the election. Della Rovere is furious, but he knows how to wait.'

Ezio spent the rest of the day in consultation with Bartolomeo, and between them they put together a combined force of recruits and *condottieri* strong enough for any battle that might ensue with Cesare.

‘It’s just as well you didn’t kill Cesare back at his *palazzo*,’ said Bartolomeo. ‘This way, he’ll draw all his supporters to him and we can smash the lot of them.’ He looked at Ezio. ‘I’ve got to hand it to you, my friend. You might almost have planned it this way.’

Ezio smiled and returned to his lodgings, where he strapped on the Pistol, and put the Double Blade into the wallet on his belt.

With a small group of hand-picked men, Ezio made up the advance guard, leaving the rest to follow some way behind. When the Cardinal of Rouen rode out in the late afternoon with his fellows and their entourage, Ezio and his horsemen followed at a safe distance. They did not have a long ride before the Cardinal stopped at a large country estate whose mansion was set behind fortified walls near the shores of Lake Bracciano.

Ezio scaled the walls of the mansion alone and shadowed the delegation of cardinals as it made its way to the Great Hall, blending in with the Borgia’s hundred or so leading officers. There were many other people present from other lands, whom Ezio did not recognize, but knew must be members of the Templar Order. Cesare, fully recovered now, stood on a raised dais in the centre of the crowded hall. Torches flickered in their sconces on the stone walls, making shadows leap and giving the congress more of an air of a witches’ coven than a gathering of military forces.

Outside, Borgia soldiers were gathering in numbers that surprised Ezio, who had not forgotten Cesare’s remark about Micheletto bringing his remaining troops out of the provinces to back him up. He was worried that even with Bartolomeo’s men and his own recruits, who had drawn up a couple of hundred yards from the mansion, they might find their match in this assembly. But it was too late now.

Ezio watched as a pathway was made between the serried ranks in the hall to allow the cardinals to approach the dais.

‘Join me and I will take back Rome for us,’ Cesare declaimed as the Cardinal of Rouen made his appearance with his fellow prelates. Seeing them, Cesare broke off.

‘What news of the conclave?’ he demanded.

The Cardinal of Rouen hesitated. ‘Good news – and bad,’ he said.

‘Spit it out!’

‘We have elected Piccolomini.’

Cesare considered this. ‘Well, at least it isn’t that fisherman’s son, della Rovere!’ He turned on the Cardinal. ‘But it’s still not the man I wanted. I wanted

a puppet. Piccolomini may have one foot in the grave, but he can still do me a lot of damage. I paid for your appointment. Is this how you thank me?'

'Della Rovere is a powerful foe.' The Cardinal hesitated again. 'And Rome is not what it once was. Borgia money has become tainted.'

Cesare looked at him coldly. 'You will regret this decision,' he said frostily.

The Cardinal bowed his head and turned to go, but as he did so, he spotted Ezio, who had made his way forward in order to see more clearly.

'It's the Assassin!' he yelled. 'His sister put me to the Question. That's how he got here. Run! He'll kill us all!'

The cardinals took to their heels as one amidst a general panic. Ezio followed them and, once outside, fired his pistol. The sound carried to his advance guard, posted just outside the walls, and they in turn fired muskets as a signal to Bartolomeo to attack. They arrived just as the gates in the walls were opened to allow the fleeing cardinals to depart. The defenders had no time to close the gates before being overpowered by the advance guard, who managed to hold the gate until Bartolomeo, whirling Bianca above his head and roaring his war cry, came up with the main Assassin force. Ezio fired his second shot into the belly of a Borgia guard, who came screaming up, flailing an evil-looking mace, but he had no time to reload. In any case, for close fighting, the Double Blade was the perfect weapon. Finding an alcove in the wall, he took shelter in it and, with practised hand, exchanged the Pistol for the Blade. Then he rushed back into the hall, looking for Cesare.

The battle in the mansion, and the area within its encircling walls, was short and bloody. The Borgia and Templar troops were unprepared for an attack of this magnitude, and they were trapped within the walls. They fought hard, and many a *condottiero* and Assassin recruit lay dead by the time it was over. The Assassins had the advantage of being already mounted, though, and few of the Borgia faction got to their horses before they were cut down.

It was late by the time the dust had settled. Ezio, bleeding from a flesh wound in his chest, had laid about him so furiously with the Double Blade that it had sliced through his own glove and cut his hand deeply. Around him lay a host of bodies, half, perhaps, of the assembly – those who had not been able to flee and ride off north into the night.

Cesare was not among them, though. He, too, had fled.

47

Much occurred in the weeks that followed. The Assassins sought Cesare frantically, but in vain. He did not return to Rome, and indeed Rome seemed purged of all Borgia and Templar influence, though Ezio and his companions remained on the alert, knowing that as long as the enemy lived, there was danger. They suspected there were still pockets of diehard loyalists just waiting for a signal.

Pius III proved to be a bookish and deeply religious man. Sadly, though, after a reign of only twenty-six days, his already frail health succumbed to the additional pressures and responsibilities the Papacy placed on it and, in October, he died. He had not, as Ezio had feared, been a puppet of the Borgia. Rather, during the short span of his supremacy, he set in motion reforms within the College of Cardinals that swept away all the corruption and sensuality fomented by his predecessor. There would be no more selling of cardinalates for money, and no more accepting of payments in order to let well-off murderers escape the gallows. Alexander VI's pragmatic doctrine of 'Let them live in order to repent' no longer held currency.

Most importantly, however, he had issued a warrant throughout the Papal States for the arrest of Cesare Borgia.

His successor was elected immediately and by an overwhelming majority. Only three cardinals opposed him – one of them being Georges d'Amboise, the Cardinal of Rouen, who vainly hoped to gain the Triple Tiara for the French. Following the check in his career caused by the election of Pius III, Giuliano della Rovere, Cardinal of San Pietro in Vincoli, had wasted no time in consolidating his supporters and assuring himself of the Papacy at the next opportunity, which he knew would come soon.

Julius II, as he styled himself, was a tough man of sixty, still vigorous, mentally and physically. He was a man of great energy, as Ezio would soon learn, a political intriguer and a warrior, and proud of his humble origins as the descendant of fishermen – for had not St Peter himself been a fisherman?

The Borgia threat still cast its shadow, though.

‘If only Cesare would show himself,’ growled Bartolomeo as he and Ezio sat in conference in the map room of his barracks.

‘He will. But only when he’s ready.’

‘My spies tell me he plans to gather his best men to attack Rome through one of its principal gates.’

Ezio considered this. ‘If Cesare’s coming from the north, as seems almost certain, he’ll try to get in by the gate near the Castra Praetoria. He might even try to retake the Castra itself as it’s in a strong strategic position.’

‘You’re probably right.’

Ezio stood. ‘Gather the Assassins. We’ll face Cesare together.’

‘And if we cannot?’

‘That’s fine talk from you, Barto! If we can’t, I will face him alone.’

They parted company, arranging to meet in Rome later in the day. If there were going to be an attack, the Holy City would be ready for it.

Ezio’s hunch proved right. He’d told Bartolomeo to summon the others to a church piazza near the Castro, and when they arrived, they made their way to the northern gate. It was already heavily defended, as Julius II had shown himself perfectly happy to accept Ezio’s advice. The sight that met their eyes, a couple of hundred yards distant, was a sobering one. There was Cesare, on a pale horse, surrounded by a group of officers wearing the uniform of his own private army, and behind him was at least a battalion of his own troops.

Even at that distance, Ezio’s keen ears could pick out Cesare’s bombast – the odd thing was, why did people still fall for it?

‘All of Italy shall be united, and you will rule at my side!’ Cesare was proclaiming.

He turned and spotted Ezio and his fellow Assassins ranged along the ramparts of the gate. Then he rode alone a little closer, though not close enough to be within crossbow- or musket-range.

‘Come to watch my triumph?’ he shouted up at them. ‘Don’t worry. This isn’t all my strength. Soon, Micheletto will arrive with my armies, but you will all be dead by then. I have enough men to deal with you.’

Ezio looked at him, then turned to look down at the mass of Papal troops, Assassin recruits and *condottieri* ranged beneath him inside the gate. He raised a hand, and the gatekeepers drew back the wooden staves that kept the gates shut. They stood ready to open them at his next signal. Ezio kept his hand raised.

‘My men will never fail me!’ cried Cesare. ‘They know what awaits them if they do! Soon you will pass from this Earth, and my dominions will return to me.’

Ezio wondered if the New Disease had affected the balance of his mind. He let his hand drop, and below him the gates swung open and the Roman forces streamed out, cavalry first, infantry running behind. Cesare yanked at his reins, desperately, forcing the bit hard into his horse's mouth as he wheeled the steed round. The violence of his manoeuvre made his mount stumble, though, and he was quickly overtaken. As for his battalion, it broke and ran at the sight of the oncoming Roman brigades.

Well, well, thought Ezio. My question is answered. These men were prepared to fight for money, but not from loyalty. You can't buy loyalty.

'Kill the Assassins!' yelled Cesare frantically. 'Uphold the honour of the Borgia!' It was all in vain, though. He was surrounded.

'Throw down your arms, Cesare,' Ezio called to him.

'Never!'

'This is not your city any more. You are no longer Captain-General. The Orsini and the Colonna families are on the side of the new Pope, and when some of them paid lip service to you, that was all it was – lip service. They were just waiting for the chance to reclaim the cities and estates you stole from them.'

A small deputation rode out through the gates now. Six knights in black armour, one of them bearing Julius II's crest – a sturdy oak tree – on a pennant. At their head, on a dapple-grey palfrey (the very opposite of a war horse) rode an elegantly dressed man whom Ezio instantly recognized as Fabio Orsini. He led his men straight up to the still-proud Cesare.

Silence fell.

'Cesare Borgia, called Valentino, sometime Cardinal of Valencia and Duke of Valence,' Orsini proclaimed – Ezio could see the triumphant twinkle in his eye – 'by order of His Holiness, Pope Julian II, I arrest you for the crimes of murder, betrayal and incest!'

The six knights fell in next to Cesare, two on each side, one before and one behind. The reins of his horse were taken from him and he was tied to the saddle.

'No, no, no, *no*!' bawled Cesare. 'This is not how it ends!'

One of the knights flicked at Cesare's horse's rump, and it started forward at a trot.

'This is *not* how it ends!' Cesare yelled defiantly. 'Chains will not hold me!' His voice rose to a scream. 'I will not die by the hand of Man!'

Everybody heard him, but nobody was listening.

'Come on, you,' said Orsini crisply.

48

‘I wondered what had happened to you,’ Ezio said. ‘Then I saw the chalk drawing of a pointing hand, and I knew you were signalling me, which is why I sent you a message. And now, here you are! I thought you might have slipped away to France.’

‘Not me – not yet!’ said Leonardo, brushing some dust off a chair at the Assassin’s Tiber Island hideaway before sitting down. Sunlight streamed in through the high windows.

‘I’m glad of it. Even gladder that you didn’t get caught in the dragnet the new Pope has organized to capture any remaining Borgia supporters.’

‘Well, you can’t keep a good man down,’ replied Leonardo. He was as finely dressed as ever, and didn’t appear to have been affected by recent events at all. ‘Pope Julius isn’t a fool – he knows who’d be useful to him and who wouldn’t, never mind what they’ve done in the past.’

‘As long as they are truly repentant.’

‘As you say,’ Leonardo answered drily.

‘And are you prepared to be useful to me?’

‘Haven’t I always been?’ smiled Leonardo. ‘Is there anything to worry about, now that Cesare’s under lock and key? It’s only a matter of time before they take him out and burn him at the stake. Look at the list of arraignments! It’s as long as your arm.’

‘Maybe you’re right.’

‘Of course, the world wouldn’t be the world without trouble,’ said Leonardo, going off on another tack. ‘It’s all very well that Cesare’s been brought down, but I’ve lost a valuable patron, and I see they’re thinking of bringing that young whippersnapper Michelangelo here from Florence. I ask you! All he can do is knock out sculptures.’

‘He’s a pretty good architect, too, from what I hear. And not a bad painter either.’

Leonardo gave him a black look. ‘You know that pointing finger I drew? One day soon, I hope, it’s going to be at the centre of a portrait of a man – John the Baptist – pointing towards heaven. Now *that* will be a painting!’

‘I didn’t say he was as good a painter as you,’ added Ezio quickly. ‘And as for being an inventor …’

‘He should stick to what he knows best, if you ask me.’

‘Leo, are you jealous?’

‘Me? Never!’

It was time to bring Leonardo back to the problem that was bothering Ezio, and the reason he’d responded to Leonardo’s message that he was seeking him out. He just hoped he could trust him, though he knew Leonardo well enough to understand what made him tick.

‘Your former employer …’ he began.

‘Cesare?’

‘Yes. I didn’t like the way he said, “Chains will not hold me.” ’

‘Come on, Ezio. He’s in the deepest dungeon of the Castel Sant’Angelo. How the mighty are fallen, eh?’

‘He still has friends.’

‘A few misguided creatures may still think he has a future, but since Micheletto and his armies don’t seem to have materialized, I can’t see that there’s any real danger.’

‘Even if Micheletto failed to keep the remains of Cesare’s forces together, which seems likely, since none of our spies in the countryside have reported any troop movements—’

‘Look, Ezio, when news reached them of della Rovere’s elevation to the Papacy, and of Cesare’s arrest, the old Borgia army will have scattered like ants from a nest when you pour boiling water into it.’

‘I won’t rest easy until I know Cesare is dead.’

‘Well, there is a way to find out.’

Ezio looked at Leonardo. ‘Do you mean the Apple?’

‘Where is it?’

‘Here.’

‘Then get it, let’s consult it.’

Ezio hesitated. ‘No, it’s too powerful. I must hide it from Mankind for ever.’

‘What, a valuable thing like that?’ Leonardo shook his head.

‘You said yourself, many years ago, that it should never be allowed to fall into the wrong hands.’

‘Then all we have to do is keep it out of the wrong hands.’

‘There is no guarantee that we can always do that.

Leonardo looked serious. ‘Look, Ezio, if you ever decide to bury it somewhere, promise me one thing.’

‘Yes?’

‘Well, two things. First, hang on to it for as long as you need it. You should have everything on your side if your goal is to eradicate the Borgia and the Templars for ever. But when you are done, and you do hide it from the world, then think of it as a seed to be planted. Leave some kind of clue as to its whereabouts for such as may be able to find it. Future generations – perhaps future Assassins – may have need of the Apple’s power one day, to use on the side of good.’

‘And if it fell into the hands of another Cesare?’

‘Back on Cesare, I see. Listen, why not put yourself out of your misery and see if the Apple can offer you any guidance?’

Ezio wrestled with himself for a few moments longer, then said, ‘All right. I agree.’

He disappeared for a moment and then returned, holding a square lead-covered box with a massive lock. From within his tunic, he took a key, tied to a silver chain around his neck, and opened the box. There, on a bed of green velvet, lay the Apple. It looked drab and grey, as it always did when inert, the size of a small melon and with a curiously soft and pliant texture, much like human skin.

‘Ask it,’ urged Leonardo, his eyes keen as he saw the Apple again. Ezio knew his friend was fighting down a desire to grab the thing and run, and he understood how great the temptation was for the polymath, whose thirst for knowledge at times threatened to overwhelm him and never let him rest.

Ezio held the Apple up and closed his eyes, concentrating his thoughts as he formulated questions. The Apple began to glow almost at once, and then it began to throw images onto the wall.

They came thick and fast and did not last long, but Ezio – and Ezio alone – saw Cesare escape from his prison and Rome. That was all, until the inchoate images on the wall coalesced to show a busy seaport, the water shining and glittering beneath a southern sun, and a fleet in the harbour. The vision dissolved, and then there was a view of a distant castle, or perhaps a fortified hill town, which Ezio somehow knew was far away – from the landscape and heat of the sun, it was certainly not in the Papal States of Italy. The architecture, too, looked foreign, but neither Ezio nor Leonardo could place it. Then Ezio saw Mario’s citadel at Monteriggioni, and the picture moved and shifted, taking him to Mario’s secret study – the Sanctuary – where the Codex pages had been assembled. The concealed door to it was closed, and on the outside of it Ezio could see arcane figures and letters written. Next it was as if he were an eagle flying over the ruins of the Assassin former stronghold. Then, abruptly, the

Apple went dead, and the only light in the room was once again provided by calm sunlight.

‘He will escape! I have to go!’ Ezio dropped the Apple back into its box and stood so abruptly he knocked over his chair.

‘What about your friends?’

‘The Brotherhood must stand, with or without me. That is how I have built it.’ Taking it from its box again, Ezio placed the Apple in its leather bag. ‘Forgive me, Leo, I have no time to waste.’ He already had his Hidden Blade and his Bracer strapped on, and he packed the Pistol and some ammunition in his belt-wallet.

‘Stop. You must think. You must plan.’

‘My plan is to finish Cesare. I should have done it long ago.’

Leonardo spread his hands. ‘I see that I cannot stop you. But I have no plans to leave Rome, and you know where my studio is.’

‘I have a gift for you,’ said Ezio. There was a small strongbox on the table between them. Ezio laid a hand on it. ‘Here.’

Leonardo rose. ‘If this is goodbye, then keep your money. I do not want it.’

Ezio smiled. ‘Of course it isn’t goodbye, and of course you want it. You need it, for your work. Take it. Think of *me* as your patron, if you like, until you find a better one.’

The two men hugged each other.

‘We shall see each other again,’ said Ezio. ‘You have my word. *Buona fortuna*, my oldest friend.’

What the Apple had predicted could not be amended, for the Apple showed the future as it would be, and no man or woman could alter that, any more than he or she could change the past.

As Ezio approached the Castel Sant’Angelo, he could see Papal guards, the new ones who wore the livery of Julius II, running out of the ancient fortress and dispersing in organized bands across the river and down the surrounding streets. Bells and trumpets rang out a warning. Ezio knew what had happened, even before a breathless captain he stopped told him:

‘Cesare’s escaped!’

‘When?’

‘The guards were being changed. About half an hour ago.’ Half an hour! Exactly the time the Apple had shown it happening!

‘Do you know how?’

‘Unless he can walk through walls, we have no idea. But it looks as if he had friends on the inside.’

‘Who? Lucrezia?’

‘No. She hasn’t stirred from her apartments since all this happened. The Pope has had her under house arrest since he took power. We’ve arrested two guards who used to work for the Borgia. One’s a former blacksmith and he might have been able to jemmy the lock, though there’s no sign of damage to the cell door, so they probably just used the key … if they’re guilty.’

‘Is Lucrezia giving us any trouble?’

‘Strangely, not. She seems … resigned to her fate.’

‘Don’t trust her. Whatever you do, don’t be lulled into a sense of false security by her manner. When she’s quiet, she’s at her most dangerous.’

‘She’s being guarded by Swiss mercenaries. They’re hard as rocks.’

‘Good.’

Ezio thought carefully. If Cesare had any friends left in Rome, and evidently he had, they’d get him out of the city as fast as they could. But the gates would already have been sealed, and from what he had seen, Cesare, bereft of the Apple and unskilled in Assassin techniques, would not be able to escape the dragnets and cordons being set up all over Rome.

That left one possibility.

The river!

The Tiber flowed into Rome from the north and left it to the west, where it flowed into the sea only a few miles away, at Ostia. Ezio remembered the slave traders he had killed, and that they had been in Cesare’s pay. They would not have been the only ones! They could get him on a boat, or a small sea-going ship, disguised as a mariner or concealed under tarpaulin amongst the cargo. It wouldn’t take long for a ship under sail or oars, going with the current, to reach the Tyrrhenian Sea, and from there – well, that depended on what Cesare’s plans were. The thing was to catch him before he could put them into effect.

Ezio made his way by the quickest route down to the mid-town docks, which were closest to the Castel. The quays were chock-a-block with boats and ships of all shapes and sizes. It would be like looking for a needle in a haystack. Half an hour. He’d barely have had time to cast off yet, and the tide was only just rising.

Finding a quiet spot, Ezio crouched down and, without hesitation this time, took the Apple out of its pouch. There was nowhere here for it to project its images, but he felt that, if he trusted it, it would find another way of communicating with him. He held it as close to him as he dared, and closed his eyes, willing it to respond to his question.

It did not glow, but he could feel it grow warm through his gloves, and it began to pulse. As it did, strange sounds came from it, or were they sounds within his head? He wasn’t sure. A woman’s voice, oddly familiar though he

could not place it, and seemingly quite distant, said softly but clearly, ‘The small caravel with red sails at Pier Six.’

Ezio ran down to the quay. It took him a little time, pushing his way through a throng of busy, cursing mariners, to locate Pier Six, and when he did so, the boat that answered the Apple’s description was just casting off. It, too, seemed familiar. Its decks were stacked with several sacks and boxes of cargo – boxes large enough to conceal a man – and on deck Ezio recognized, with a shock, the seaman he had left for dead after his abortive rescue of *Madonna* Solari. The man was limping badly as he approached one of the boxes and, with a mate, shifted its position. Ezio noticed that the box had holes bored along each side near the top. He ducked behind a rowing boat, which was raised on trestles for repainting, to keep out of sight, as the sailor he had lamed turned to look back towards the quay, scanning it, perhaps to check for pursuers.

He watched helplessly for a moment as the caravel pushed out into midstream, raising one of its sails to catch the stiff breeze out there. Even on horseback, he couldn’t follow the little ship along the river’s bank, since the path was often blocked or interrupted by buildings that came right up to the water. He had to find a boat for himself.

He made his way back to the quays and walked hastily along them. The crew of a shallop had just finished unloading, and the boat itself was still rigged. Ezio approached the men.

‘I need to hire your boat,’ he said urgently.

‘We’ve just put in.’

‘I’ll pay handsomely.’ Ezio delved into his purse and showed them a handful of gold ducats.

‘We’ve got to get the cargo seen to first,’ said one crew member.

‘Where d’you want to go?’ asked another.

‘Downstream,’ said Ezio, ‘and I need to go now.’

‘See to the cargo,’ said a newcomer, approaching. ‘I’ll take the *signore*. Jacopo, you come with me. It won’t take more than the two of us to sail her.’

Ezio turned to thank the newcomer and recognized, with a shock, that it was Claudio, the young thief he’d rescued from the Borgia.

Claudio smiled at him. ‘One way of thanking you, *Messere*, for saving my life. And keep your money, by the way.’

‘What are you doing here?’

‘I wasn’t cut out for thievery,’ said Claudio. ‘La Volpe saw that. I’ve always been a good sailor, so he lent me the money to buy this boat. I’m the master, and I do a good trade between here and Ostia.’

‘We need to hurry. Cesare’s Borgia’s escaped.’

Claudio turned and barked out an order to his mate. Jacopo sprang aboard and began to prepare the sails, then he and Ezio embarked, and the rest of the crew cast them off.

The shallop, free of cargo, felt light in the water. Once they reached midstream, Claudio put on as much sail as he could, and soon the caravel, which was more heavily laden, ceased to be a speck in the distance.

'Is that what we're after?' asked Claudio.

'Yes, please God,' replied Ezio.

'Better get your head down,' said Claudio. 'We're well-known on this stretch, but if they see you, they'll know what's up. I know that craft. It's run by an odd bunch; they don't socialize.'

'D'you know how many crew there are?'

'Five, usually. Maybe fewer. But don't worry. I haven't forgotten what La Volpe taught me – it still comes in handy, sometimes – and Jacopo here knows how to use a blackjack.'

Ezio sank beneath the low gunwale, raising his head from time to time just to check the closing distance between them and their objective.The caravel was a faster vessel than the shallop, though, despite it's heavier load, and Ostia was in sight before Claudio could draw alongside. Nevertheless he boldly hailed the caravel.

'You look pretty heavily laden,' he called. 'What you got on board – gold bullion?'

'None of your business,' the master of the caravel snarled back from his place near the wheel. And back off. You're crowding my water.'

'Sorry, mate,' said Claudio, as Jacopo brought the shallop right alongside, bumping the caravel's fenders. Then he cried to Ezio, '*Now!*'

Ezio leapt from his hiding place across the narrow gap dividing the two ships. Recognizing him, the lame sailor gave out a strangled roar and lunged at him with a bill hook; it caught on Ezio's Bracer, and Ezio was able to pull him close enough to finish him with a deep thrust of the Hidden Blade into his side. While he'd been so engaged, he'd failed to notice another crewman stealing up on him from behind, brandishing a cutlass. He turned in momentary alarm, unable to avoid the descending blade, when a shot rang out and the man arched his back, letting his cutlass fall to the deck before crashing overboard himself.

'Look out!' yelled Jacopo, who was holding the shallop alongside as the master of the caravel strove to get clear. A third seaman had emerged from below decks and was using a crowbar to prise open the upright crate with holes along its top sides, while a fourth was crouching at his side, covering him with a wheel-lock pistol. No ordinary sailor would have access to such a gun, thought

Ezio, remembering the battle with the slave-traders. Claudio leapt from the shallop onto the caravel's deck and threw himself on the man with the crowbar, while Ezio darted forward and skewered the wrist of the hand holding the gun with his Hidden Blade. It fired harmlessly into the deck and the man retreated, whimpering, holding his wrist, trying to stop the blood pulsing out of the antebrachial vein.

The master of the boat, seeing his men routed, pulled a pistol himself and fired at Ezio, but the caravel lurched in the current at the crucial moment and the shot went wide, though not wide enough, as the ball sliced a nick in Ezio's right ear, which bled heavily. Shaking his head, Ezio levelled his gun at the master and shot him through the forehead.

'Quick!' he said to Claudio. 'You take the wheel of this thing and I'll deal with our friend here.'

Claudio nodded and ran to bring the caravel under control. Feeling the blood from his ear soak his collar, Ezio twisted his opponent's wrist hard to loosen his grip on the crowbar. Then he brought his knee up into the man's groin, seized his collar and half dragged, half kicked him to the gunwales, where he tossed him overboard.

In the silence that followed the fight, furious and confused shouts and imprecations could be heard coming from the crate.

'I will kill you for this. I will twist my sword in your gut and give you more pain than you could ever dream possible.'

'I hope you're comfortable, Cesare,' said Ezio. 'But if you're not, don't worry. Once we get to Ostia, we'll arrange something a little more civilized for your return trip.'

'It's not fair,' said Jacopo from the shallop. 'I didn't get a chance to use my blackjack!'

Part Two

Everything is permitted. Nothing is true.

Dogma Sicarii, I, i.

49

It was late in the spring of the Year of Our Lord 1504. The Pope tore open the letter a courier had just brought him, scanned it, then banged a meaty fist down on his desk in triumph. The other hand held up the letter, from which heavy seals dangled.

‘God bless King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Aragon and Castile!’ he cried.

‘Good news, Your Holiness?’ asked Ezio, seated in a chair across from him.

Julius II smiled darkly. ‘Yes! Cesare Borgia has been safely delivered into one of their strongest and most remote *rocca*!’

‘Where?’

‘Ah, that’s classified information, even to you. I can’t take any chances with Cesare.’

Ezio bit his lip. Had Julius guessed what he’d do if he knew the location?

Julius continued reassuringly: ‘Don’t look so downcast, dear Ezio. I can tell you this: it’s a massive fortress, lost in the plains of central north-eastern Spain, and totally impregnable.’

Ezio knew that Julius had had his reasons for not having Cesare burned at the stake – in case it made a martyr of him – and he acknowledged that this was the next best thing. But still Cesare’s words haunted him: ‘Chains will never hold me.’ Ezio felt in his heart that the only thing that would hold Cesare securely was Death. But he smiled his congratulations anyway.

‘They’ve got him in a cell at the top of the central keep, in a tower one hundred and forty feet high,’ Julius continued. ‘We don’t have anything more to worry about, as far as he’s concerned.’ The Pope looked at Ezio keenly. ‘What I’ve just told you is *also* classified information, by the way, so don’t go getting any ideas. In any event, at a word from me, they’ll switch the location, just in case anyone goes looking for him and I get wind of it.’

Ezio let it go and changed tack. ‘And Lucrezia? Do we have any news from Ferrara?’

‘Well, her third marriage seems to be doing her good, though I must admit I was worried at first. The d’Este family are such a bunch of snobs that I thought

the old Duke would never accept her as a suitable wife for his son. Marrying a Borgia! Talk about marrying beneath you! To them, it would be a bit like you getting hitched to your scullery maid!' The Pope laughed heartily. 'But she's settled down. Not a peep out of her. She's taken to exchanging love letters and even poems with her old friend Pietro Bembo – all above board, of course' – here Julius winked broadly – 'but she is basically a good and faithful wife to Duke Alfonso; she even goes to church and embroiders tapestries. Of course, there's no question of her coming back to Rome – *ever*! She'll end her days in Ferrara, and she should be thankful she's got away with her head still on her shoulders. All in all, I think it's safe to say that we've got that flock of Catalan perverts out of our hair for good.'

Ezio wondered if the Vatican spy ring was as well informed about the Templars as they were about the Borgia. Cesare had been their leader and continued to be so, even from prison. But about this the Pope kept his counsel.

He had to admit that the affairs of Italy had seen worse days than these. They had a strong Pope, who'd had the sense to retain Agostino Chigi as his banker, and the French were on the back foot. King Louis hadn't left Italy, but he had at least withdrawn to the north, where he seemed content to dig in. In addition, the French king had ceded Naples to King Ferdinand of Aragon.

'I hope so, Your Holiness.'

Julius looked at Ezio keenly. 'Listen, Ezio, I'm not a fool, so don't take me for one. Why do you think I brought you in as my counsellor? I know there are still pockets of Borgia loyalists around the countryside – and even a few diehards left in the city – but I have *other* enemies than the Borgia to worry about these days.'

'The Borgia could still pose a threat.'

'I don't think so.'

'And what are you doing about your other enemies?'

'I'm reforming the Papal Guard. Have you seen what good soldiers the Swiss are? Best mercenaries of the lot! And since they won independence from the Holy Roman Empire and Maximilian five or six years ago, they've been putting themselves out to hire. They're totally loyal and not very emotional – such a change from our own dear fellow countrymen – and I'm thinking of getting a brigade of them put together as my personal bodyguard. I'll arm them with the usual halberds and stuff, but I'm also issuing them with Leonardo's muskets.' He paused. 'All I need is a name for them.' He looked at Ezio quizzically. 'Any ideas?'

'How about the Swiss Guard?' suggested Ezio, who was a little tired.

The Pope considered this. 'Well, it's not startlingly original, Ezio. Frankly, I rather favoured the Julian Guard, but one doesn't like to sound too egotistical.'

He grinned. ‘All right, I’ll use what you propose. It’ll do for the time being, at any rate.’

They were interrupted by the sound of hammering and other building works, coming from above their heads, and other parts of the Vatican.

‘Wretched builders,’ commented the Pope. ‘Still, it has to be done.’ He crossed the room to a bell pull. ‘I’ll get someone to go and shut them up until we’ve finished. Sometimes I think builders are the greatest destructive force Man has yet invented.’

An attendant arrived at once and the Pope gave him his orders. Minutes later, amid muffled swearing, tools were downed, noisily.

‘What are you having done?’ asked Ezio, knowing that architecture vied with warfare as the Pope’s two greatest passions.

‘I’m having all the Borgia apartments and offices boarded up,’ replied Julius. ‘Far too sumptuous. More worthy of a Nero than the Leader of the Church. And I’m razing all their buildings on the roof of the Castel Sant’Angelo. I’ll turn it into one big garden – I might even stick a little summer house up there.’

‘Good idea,’ said Ezio, smiling to himself. The summer house would doubtless be a real pleasure dome, fit, if not for a king, at least for trysts with one or other of the Pope’s mistresses – female or male. The Pope’s private life didn’t concern Ezio. What mattered was that he was a good man and a staunch ally. And compared with Rodrigo, his corruptions were about as significant as a child’s tantrums. Furthermore, he’d steadily continued the moral reforms of his predecessor, Pius III.

‘I’m having the Sistine Chapel done up as well,’ continued the Pope. ‘It’s so *dull*! So I’ve commissioned that bright young artist from Florence, Michelangelo what’s-his-name, to paint some frescoes on the ceiling. Lots of religious scenes, you know the kind of thing. I thought of asking Leonardo, but his head’s so full of ideas that he scarcely ever finishes a big painting. It’s a pity. I rather liked that portrait he did of Francesco del Giocondo’s wife …’

Julius interrupted himself and looked at Ezio. ‘But you didn’t come here to talk about my interest in modern art.’

‘No.’

‘Are you *sure* you’re not taking the threat of a Borgia revival too seriously?’

‘I think we *should* take it seriously.’

‘Look – my army has regained most of the Romagna for the Vatican. There’s no army left for the Borgia to fight with.’

‘Cesare is still alive! With him as a figurehead—’

‘I hope you’re not questioning my judgement, Ezio? You know my reasons for sparing his life. In any case, where he is now, he’s as good as buried alive.’

‘Micheletto is still at large.’

‘Pah! Without Cesare, Micheletto is nothing.’

‘Micheletto knows Spain well.’

‘He’s nothing, I tell you.’

‘He knows Spain. He was born in Valencia. He’s the bastard nephew of Rodrigo.’

The Pope, who, despite his years, was a large and vigorous man still in the prime of his life, had been pacing the room during this last exchange. Now, he returned to the desk, placed his large hands on it and leant threateningly over Ezio. His manner was convincing.

‘You are letting your worst fears run away with you,’ he said. ‘We don’t even know whether Micheletto is still alive or not.’

‘I think we should find out, once and for all.’

The Pope pondered Ezio’s point and relaxed slightly, sitting down again. He tapped the heavy signet ring on his left hand with the index finger of his right.

‘What do you want to do?’ he asked heavily. ‘Don’t expect any resources from me. The budget’s overstretched as it is.’

‘The first thing is to locate and destroy any last diehards in the city of Rome itself. We may find someone who knows something about Micheletto – his whereabouts or his fate – then …’

‘Then?’

‘Then, if he’s still alive …’

‘You’ll destroy him?’

‘Yes.’ *Unless he turns out to be more useful to me alive*, Ezio thought.

Julius sat back. ‘I am impressed by your determination, Ezio. It almost frightens me. And I am glad I’m not an enemy of the Assassins myself.’

Ezio looked up sharply. ‘You know about the Brotherhood?’

The Pope made a tent of his fingers. ‘I always needed to know who the enemies of my enemy were. But your secret is safe with me. As I told you, I am not a fool.’

50

‘Your instinct is right. I will guide you and guard you, but I do not belong to you and soon you must let me go. I have no power over him that controls me. I must obey the will of the Master of the Apple.’

Ezio was alone in his secret lodgings, holding the Apple in his hands as he tried to use it to help him locate his quarry in Rome, when the mysterious voice came to him again. This time he could not tell if the voice was male or female, or whether it came from the Apple or somewhere in his mind.

Your instinct is right. But, also, *I have no power over him that controls me.* Why then had the Apple shown him only hazy images of Micheletto – just enough to tell him that Cesare’s henchman was still alive. And it could not – or would not – pinpoint Cesare’s location. At least for now.

Suddenly Ezio realized something his inner self had always known: that he should not abuse its power by overusing it and that he should not become dependent on the Apple. Ezio knew that it was his own will that had blurred the answers he sought. He must not be slothful. He must fend for himself. One day he would have to again, anyway.

He thought of Leonardo. What could that man not do if he had the Apple? And Leonardo, the best of men, nevertheless invented weapons of destruction as easily as he produced sublime paintings. Might the Apple not only have the power to help Mankind, but to corrupt it? In Rodrigo’s or Cesare’s hands – if either of them had ever been able to master it – it could have become the instrument, not of salvation, but destruction!

Power is a potent drug, and Ezio did not want to fall victim to it.

He looked at the Apple again. It seemed inert in his hands now, but as he placed it back in its box, he found he could hardly bear to close the lid. What paths could it not open up for him?!

No, he must bury it. He must learn to live by the Code without it. But not yet!

He had always sensed in his heart that Micheletto lived. Now he knew it for a fact. And while he lived, he would do his utmost to free his evil master, Cesare.

Ezio had not told Pope Julius his full plan: he intended to seek out Cesare and kill him, or die in the attempt.

It was the only way.

He would use the Apple only when he had to. He had to keep his own instincts and powers of deduction sharp, in anticipation of the day when the Apple would no longer be in his possession. He would hunt down the Borgia diehards in Rome without it. Only if he failed, within three days, to unearth them, would he resort to its power again. He still had his friends – the girls of The Rosa in Fiore, La Volpe's thieves and his fellow Assassins – and with their help, how could he fail?

Ezio knew that the Apple would, in ways he could not fully comprehend, help him, as long as he respected its potential. Perhaps that was its secret. Perhaps no one could ever fully master it, except a member of the race of ancient Adepts who had left the world in trust to Humanity, to make or break it, as their will elected.

He closed the lid and locked the box.

Ezio summoned a meeting of the Brotherhood on Tiber Island that night.

'My friends,' he started, 'I know how hard we have striven, and I believe that victory may be in sight, but there is still work to do.'

The others, all except Machiavelli, looked at each other in surprise.

'But Cesare is muzzled!' cried La Volpe. 'For good!'

'And we have a new Pope, who has always been an enemy of the Borgia,' added Claudia.

'And the French are driven back,' put in Bartolomeo. 'The countryside is secure. And the Romagna is back in Papal hands.'

Ezio held out a hand to quieten them. 'We all know that a victory is not a victory until it is absolute.'

'And Cesare may indeed be muzzled, but he lives,' said Machiavelli quietly. 'And Micheletto …'

'Exactly,' Ezio said. 'And as long as there are pockets of Borgia diehards, both here and in the Papal States, there is still seed from which a Borgia revival may grow.'

'You are too cautious, Ezio. We have won,' cried Bartolomeo.

'Barto, you know as well as I do that a handful of city states in the Romagna remain loyal to Cesare. They are strongly fortified.'

'Then I'll go and sort them out.'

'They will keep. Caterina Sforza's army is not strong enough to attack them from Forlì, but I have sent messengers requesting that she keep a close eye on them. I have a more pressing job for you.'

Oh God, thought Ezio, *why does my heart still skip a beat when I mention her name?*

'Which is?'

'I want you to take a force to Ostia and keep watch on the port. I want to know about any suspicious ships coming in and out of the harbour. I want you to have messengers on horseback ready to bring news to me here the instant you have anything to report.'

Bartolomeo snorted. 'Sentry duty! Hardly the sort of work for a man of action like me.'

'You will get as much action as you need when the time is right to move against the rebel city states I've mentioned. In the meantime, they live in hope, waiting for a signal. Let them live in hope, it'll keep them quiet. Our job is to snuff out that hope – for ever.'

Machiavelli smiled. 'I agree with Ezio,' he said.

'Well, all right. If you insist,' Bartolomeo replied grumpily.

'Pantasilea will enjoy the sea air after her ordeal.'

Bartolomeo brightened. 'I hadn't thought of that.'

'Good.' Ezio turned to his sister. 'Claudia, I imagine the change of regime hasn't affected business at The Rosa in Fiore too badly?'

Claudia grinned. 'It's funny how even princes of the Church find it hard to keep the devil between their loins in abeyance – however many cold baths they say they take.'

'Tell your girls to keep their ears to the ground. Julius has the College of Cardinals firmly under his control, but he still has plenty of enemies with ambitions of their own, and some of them might just be mad enough to think that if they could free Cesare, they could use him as a means of furthering their own ends. And keep an eye on Johann Burchard, too.'

'What? Rodrigo's Master of Ceremonies? Surely he's harmless enough. He hated having to organize all those orgies. Isn't he just a functionary?'

'Nevertheless, anything you hear – especially if it's about diehard factions still at large here in Rome – let me know.'

'It'll be easier now that we no longer have Borgia guards breathing down our necks every minute of the day.'

Ezio smiled a little absently. 'I have another question to ask. I have been too busy to visit, and it troubles me, but how is our mother?'

Claudia's face clouded. 'She keeps the accounts, but, Ezio, I fear she is failing. She seldom goes out. She speaks more and more often of Giovanni, and of Federico and Petruccio.'

Ezio fell silent for a moment, thinking of his lost father and brothers. ‘I will come when I can,’ he said. ‘Give her my love and ask her to forgive my neglect.’

‘She understands the work you have to do. She knows that you do it not only for the good of us all, but for the sake of our departed kinsmen.’

‘The destruction of those who killed them shall be their monument,’ said Ezio, his voice hard.

‘And what of my people?’ asked La Volpe.

‘Gilberto, your people are vital to me. My recruits remain loyal, but they see that life returns to normal, and most of them long to return to the lives they led before we persuaded them to join us in the struggle to throw off the Borgia yoke. They retain their skills, but they are not sworn members of the Brotherhood, and I cannot expect them to bear the yoke that we bear, for it is a yoke that only death will relieve us of.’

‘I understand.’

‘I know the men and women under your command are city-bred. Some country air will make a change.’

‘How do you mean?’ asked La Volpe suspiciously.

‘Send your best people into the towns and villages around Rome. There will be no need to go further out than Viterbo, Terni, L’Aquila, Avezzano and Nettuno. I doubt if, beyond the rough circle round Rome that those towns define, we’d find much. There can’t be many diehards left, and those there are will want to be within striking distance of Rome.’

‘They’ll be hard to find.’

‘You must try. You know yourself how even a small force in the right place can do untold damage.’

‘I’ll send out my best thieves and disguise them as peddlers.’

‘Report anything you find back to me, especially news of Micheletto.’

‘Do you really think he’s still out there somewhere? Mightn’t he have gone back to Spain, or at least the Kingdom of Naples? If he isn’t dead already, that is.’

‘I am convinced he’s still alive.’

La Volpe shrugged. ‘That’s good enough for me.’

When the others had gone, Machiavelli turned to Ezio and said, ‘What about me?’

‘You and I will work together.’

‘Nothing would give me greater pleasure, but before we go into details, I have a question.’

‘Go ahead.’

‘Why not use the Apple?’

Ezio, sighing, explained as best he could.

When he'd finished Machiavelli looked at him, took out his little black notebook and wrote in it at length. Then he stood up, crossed the room and sat down next to Ezio, squeezing his shoulder affectionately as he did so. Any such gesture from Machiavelli was as rare as hen's teeth.

'Let's get down to business,' he said.

'This is what I have in mind,' said Ezio.

'Tell me.'

'There are women in this city who may help us. We must seek them out and talk to them.'

'Well, you picked the right man for the job. I am a diplomat.'

Gaining access to the first was easy – Pope Julius had seen to that – but getting her to talk wasn't.

She received them in a sumptuous parlour on the *piano nobile* of her large house, whose windows (on four sides) provided sublime vistas of the once-great city, now part crumbling, but also part magnificent, after the last few Popes had poured money into self-aggrandisement.

'I don't see how I can help you,' she said after listening to them, although Ezio noticed that she didn't meet their eyes.

'If there are pockets of diehards in the city, we need to know about them, *Altezza*, and we need your help,' said Machiavelli. 'If we find out later that you have held out on us …'

'Don't threaten me, young man,' retorted Vannozza. '*Dio mio!* Do you know how long ago it is since Rodrigo and I were lovers? Well over twenty years!'

'Perhaps your children … ?' asked Ezio.

She smiled grimly. 'I expect you are wondering how a woman like me could have produced such a brood,' she said. 'But I tell you there is very little Cattanei blood in them. Well, in Lucrezia, perhaps; but Cesare …' She broke off and Ezio could see the pain in her eyes.

'Do you know where he is?'

'I know no more than you do, and I don't care to. It's years since I've even seen him, though we lived in the same city. He is dead to me.'

Clearly the Pope was being very careful to keep Cesare's whereabouts secret. 'Perhaps your daughter knows?'

'If I don't, why should she? She lives in Ferrara now. You could go and ask her, but it's a long way north, and the Holy Father has forbidden her ever to return to Rome.'

'Do you see her?' asked Machiavelli.

Vannozza sighed. ‘As I said, Ferrara’s a long way north. I don’t care to travel much these days.’

She looked around the room, glancing at the servants who stood near the door, and occasionally at the water clock. She had offered them no refreshment and seemed eager for them to go. An unhappy woman, she seemed ill at ease and constantly kneaded her hands together, but was that because she was concealing something, or because she was being forced to talk about people she’d clearly rather not discuss?

‘I have – or rather *had* – eight grandchildren,’ she said unexpectedly. Ezio and Machiavelli knew that Lucrezia had had several children by her various husbands, but few had survived childhood. People said that Lucrezia had never taken pregnancy very seriously, and that she had a habit of partying and dancing right up to the moment of her accouchement. Had that alienated her from her mother? Cesare had a daughter, Louise, who was a child of four.

‘Do you see any of them?’ asked Machiavelli.

‘No. Louise is still in Rome, I think, but her mother has made sure that she’s more French than Italian.’

She rose then, and the servants, as if on cue, opened the room’s ornate double doors.

‘I wish I could be of more assistance …’

‘We thank you for your time,’ said Machiavelli drily.

‘There are other people you might like to talk to,’ said Vannozza.

‘We intend to visit the *Princesse* d’Albret.’

Vannozza pressed her lips together. ‘*Buona fortuna*,’ she said, without conviction. ‘You’d better hurry, too. I hear she’s making preparations to leave for France. Perhaps, if I’m lucky, she’ll come and say goodbye.’

Ezio and Machiavelli had risen, too, and made their farewells.

Once outside in the street, Machiavelli said, ‘I think we’ll have to use the Apple, Ezio.’

‘Not yet.’

‘Have it your own way, but I think you’re a fool. Let’s go and see the princess. Lucky we can both speak French.’

‘Charlotte d’Albret won’t be leaving for France today – I’ve got men watching her *palazzo*. There’s someone else I want to see first. In fact, I’m surprised Vanozza didn’t mention her.’

‘Who?’

‘Giulia Farnese.’

‘Doesn’t she live in Carbognano these days?’

‘My spies tell me she’s in town, so we ought to take advantage of that.’

‘What makes you think we’ll get any more out of her than we got out of Vannozza?’

Ezio smiled. ‘Giulia was Rodrigo’s last mistress and he was passionate about her.’

‘I remember when the French captured her. He was beside himself.’

‘And then the French foolishly ransomed her for three thousand ducats. He’d have paid twenty times that amount to get her back. He’d probably have struck any kind of deal they wanted. But I guess that’s what happens when your mistress is over forty years younger than you are: you get besotted.’

‘It didn’t stop him dumping her when she turned twenty-five, though.’

‘Yes. She was too old for him by then! Let’s hurry.’

They made their way north, through the narrow streets in the direction of the Quirinale.

On the way, Machiavelli noticed that Ezio was becoming increasingly ill at ease.

‘What’s the matter?’ he asked.

‘Have you not noticed anything?’

‘What?’

‘Don’t look round!’ Ezio was terse.

‘No.’

‘I think we’re being followed … by a woman.’

‘Since when?’

‘Since we left Vannozza’s *palazzo*.’

‘One of her people?’

‘Perhaps.’

‘Alone?’

‘I think so.’

‘Then we’d better shake her.’

Impatient though they were to get on, they slowed their pace, looking in shop windows and even pausing at a wine booth. There, over the rim of his beaker, Ezio caught sight of a tall, athletically built blonde woman dressed in a good, but unassuming dark green robe of a lightweight material. She’d be able to move fast in clothes like that if the need arose.

‘I’ve got her,’ he said.

They both scanned the wall of the building against which the booth was erected. It was a new place, constructed in a fashionably rusticated style of large roughened slabs of stone separated by sunken joints. At intervals, iron rings for tethering horses had been let into the wall.

It was perfect.

They made their way to the back of the booth, but there was no way out there.

'We'll have to be quick,' said Machiavelli.

'Watch me!' replied Ezio, putting his beaker down on a table near the entrance. A few seconds later he was halfway up the wall, with Machiavelli close behind him. Bystanders gaped as the two men, their capes fluttering in the breeze, disappeared over the rooftops, leaping across alleyways and streets, sending tiles skeetering down to smash on the cobbles, or flop in the mud of unmade lanes as the people below ducked or jumped out of the way.

Even if she'd been able to, the woman couldn't climb vertical walls in a long skirt, but Ezio saw that her dress had a carefully disguised slit to the thigh on one side, enabling her to run, and she was tearing through the streets after them, thrusting aside anyone who got in her way. Whoever she was, she was well-trained.

At last they lost her. Breathing hard, they came to a halt on the roof of Sant Niccolò de Portiis, and lay down flat, keenly scanning the streets below. There seemed to be no one unduly suspicious amongst the citizens in the streets, though Ezio thought he recognized two of La Volpe's thieves working the crowd, using sharp little knives to cut purses. Presumably they were two who hadn't been selected to go out into the surrounding countryside, but he'd have to ask Gilberto about that later.

'Let's go down,' suggested Machiavelli.

'No, it's easier to stay out of sight up here and we haven't far to go.'

'She didn't seem to have much trouble following us. Lucky for us there was that roof with a high wall round it, where we could change direction without her noticing.'

Ezio nodded. Whoever she was, she'll be reporting back by now. He wished she were on their side. As things stood, they'd have to get to the large apartment Giulia kept in Rome, and then get out of the Quirinale district fast. Maybe he should detail a couple of his recruits to watch their backs on any future forays. The Borgia diehards were lying low under the new Pope's tough regime, but only to lull the authorities into a false sense of security.

Giulia's first husband, Orsino Orsini, had been happy to turn a blind eye to the affair his nineteen-year-old wife had embarked on with the sixty-two-year-old Rodrigo Borgia. She had a daughter, Laura, but no one knew if she was the child of Orsino or Rodrigo. Rodrigo, despite being a Valencian by birth, had risen through the Church until he controlled the Vatican's purse strings, and he had shown his gratitude to his delicious young mistress by installing her in a brand-new house (which she'd long since been obliged to quit) conveniently close to the Vatican, and by making her brother Alessandro a cardinal. The other

cardinals called him ‘the Cardinal of the Skirts’ behind his back, though of course never in Rodrigo’s presence. Giulia they called ‘the Bride of Christ’.

Ezio and Machiavelli dropped to the ground in the *piazza* onto which the princess’s apartment block fronted. A couple of Papal Guards stood nearby, but otherwise the square was deserted. The guards’ tunics bore, on their shoulders, the crest of the della Rovere family: a massive oak tree, root and branch, now surmounted by the Triple Tiara and the keys of Saint Peter. Ezio recognized the men – six months earlier they’d been in Borgia livery. How times had changed, as now they saluted him and he acknowledged them.

‘Fuckers,’ said Machiavelli under his breath.

‘A man’s got to work,’ said Ezio. ‘I’m surprised that you, of all people, can take issue with such a bagatelle.’

‘Come on.’

They’d arrived without due notice and it took some trouble to convince the Farnese attendants – six blue fleurs-de-lys ranged on a yellow background on their capes – to admit them, but, as Ezio knew, *signora* Farnese was at home. She received them in a room that was half as gaudy but twice as tasteful as La Vannozza’s. At thirty, she had more than retained the beauty of her youth and the intelligence that informed it. Despite them being unexpected guests, the *signora* had *Moscato* and *panpetati e mielati* served for them immediately.

It soon became clear that she knew nothing and was innocent of any Borgia taint, despite her previous closeness to that execrable family (as Machiavelli called them). Machiavelli saw that she had moved on, and when he and Ezio asked her about her once close friendship with Lucrezia, all she said was, ‘What I saw of her was her good side. I think she fell too much under the bullying sway of her father and brother. I thank God she is rid of them.’ She paused. ‘If only she had met Pietro Bembo earlier. Those two were soul mates. He might have taken her to Venice and saved her from her dark side.’

‘Do you see her still?’

‘Alas, Ferrara is so far to the north, and I have my hands full, running Carbognano. Even friendships die, Ezio Auditore.’

An image of Caterina Sforza blew into his mind before he had a chance to extinguish it. Ah, God, how the thought of her caught at his heart still.

It was late afternoon by the time they left. They kept a close eye out for anyone shadowing them, but there was nobody.

‘We must use the Apple,’ said Machiavelli again.

‘This is but the first day of three. We must learn to trust ourselves and our own intelligence, and not lean on what has been vouchsafed us.’

‘The matter is pressing.’

‘One more appointment today, Niccolò. Then, perhaps, we shall see.’

The *Princesse* d’Albret, *Dâme* de Chalus, Duchess of Valentinois’ was, according to the gatekeepers of her opulent villa in the Pinciano district, not at home. But Ezio and Machiavelli, impatient and tired, pushed past anyway, and encountered Charlotte in her *piano nobile*, engrossed in packing. Huge chests full of costly linen and books and jewellery stood about the half-empty room, and in a corner, the confused little four-year-old Louise, Cesare’s only legitimate heir, played with a wooden doll.

‘You are damned impertinent,’ said the cold-looking blonde who confronted them, her dark brown eyes flashing fire.

‘We have the imprimatur of the Pope himself,’ lied Ezio. ‘Here is his warrant.’ He held up a blank parchment, from which impressive-looking seals hung.

‘Bastards,’ said the woman coolly. ‘If you think I know where Cesare is imprisoned, you are fools. I never want to see him again, and I pray that none of his *sang maudit* has passed into the veins of my innocent little daughter.’

‘We also seek Micheletto,’ said Machiavelli implacably.

‘That Catalan peasant,’ she spat. ‘How should I know?’

‘Your husband told you how he might escape, if taken,’ suggested Machiavelli. ‘He depended on you.’

‘Do you think so? I don’t! Perhaps Cesare confided in one of his dozens of mistresses. Perhaps the one that gave him the *malattia venerea*?’

‘Do you—?’

‘I never touched him after the first pustules appeared, and he at least had the decency to keep away from me and wallow in the gutter with his whores from then on. And father eleven brats by them. At least I am clean, and my daughter, too. As you see, I am getting out of here. France is a far better country than this wretched hellhole. I’m going back to La Motte-Feuilly.’

‘Not to Navarre?’ asked Machiavelli slyly.

‘I see you are trying to trick me.’ She turned her cold, bony face towards them and Ezio noticed that her beauty was marred – or enhanced – by a dimple in the middle of her chin. ‘I do not choose to go to that province merely because my brother married the heiress to the throne and thereby became king.’

‘Does your brother remain faithful to Cesare?’ asked Ezio.

‘I doubt it. Why don’t you stop wasting my time and go and ask him?’

‘Navarre is far away.’

‘Exactly. Which is why I wish you and your saturnine friend were on your way there. And now it is late and I have work to do. Please leave.’

‘A wasted day,’ commented Machiavelli as they took to the streets again, the shadows lengthening.

‘I don’t think so. We know that none of those closest to Cesare are harbouring or protecting him.’ Ezio paused. ‘All the most important women in his life hated him, and even Giulia had no time for Rodrigo.’

Machiavelli grimaced. ‘Imagine being fucked by a man old enough to be your grandfather.’

‘Well, she didn’t do too badly out of it.’

‘We still don’t know where Cesare is. Use the Apple.’

‘No, not yet. We must stand on our own feet.’

‘Well,’ sighed Machiavelli. ‘At least God gave us good minds.’

At that moment, one of Machiavelli’s spies came running up out of breath. He was a small, bald man with alert eyes and a wild face.

‘Bruno?’ said Machiavelli, surprised and concerned.

‘*Maestro*,’ panted the man. ‘Thank God I’ve found you.’

‘What is it?’

‘The Borgia diehards! They sent someone to follow you and *Maestro* Ezio—’

‘And?’

‘Sure that you were out of the way, they have taken Claudia!’

‘My sister! Sweet Jesus – how?’ gasped Ezio.

‘She was in the square outside Saint Peter’s – you know those rickety wooden colonnades the Pope wants to tear down?’

‘Get on with it!’

‘They took her – she was organizing her girls, getting them to infiltrate …’

‘Where is she now?’

‘They have a hideout in the Prati – just to the east of the Vatican. That’s where they’ve taken her.’ Bruno quickly gave them the details of where Claudia was being held prisoner.

Ezio looked at Machiavelli.

‘Let’s go!’ he said.

‘At least we’ve found out where they are,’ said Machiavelli, drily as ever, as the two of them bounded up to the rooftops again, running and leaping across Rome until they came to the Tiber, where they crossed the *ponte* della Rovere and made haste again towards their goal.

The place Machiavelli’s spy, Bruno, had indicated was a ramshackle villa just north of the Prati district market. But its crumbling stucco belied a brand-new iron-bound front door, and the grilles on the windows were new and freshly painted.

Before Machiavelli could stop him, Ezio had gone up to the door and hammered on it.

The judas set into it opened and a beady eye regarded them, then, to their amazement, the door swung smoothly back on well-oiled hinges.

They found themselves in a nondescript courtyard where there was no one about. Whoever had opened the door – and closed it firmly behind them – had disappeared. There were doors on three sides of the yard. The one opposite the entrance was open And above it was a tattered banner bearing a black bull in a golden field.

'Trapped,' said Machiavelli succinctly. 'What weapons do you have?'

Ezio had his trusty Hidden Blade, his sword and his dagger. Machiavelli carried a light sword and a stiletto.

'Come in, gentlemen, you are most welcome,' said a disembodied voice from a window overlooking the courtyard somewhere high up in the wall above the open door. 'I think we have something to trade with.'

'The Pope knows where we are,' retorted Machiavelli loudly. 'You are lost. Give yourselves up. The cause you serve is dead.'

A hollow laugh was his rejoinder. 'Is it indeed? I think not. But come in. We knew you'd take the bait. Bruno has been working for us for a year now.'

'Bruno?'

'Treachery runs in families, and dear Bruno's is no exception. All Bruno wanted was a little more cash than you were giving him. He's worth it. He managed to inveigle Claudia here, in the hope of meeting one of the English cardinals. They sit on the fence, as the English always do, and Claudia hoped to swing him to your side and get a little information out of him. Unfortunately, Cardinal Shakeshaft met with a terrible accident – he was run over by a carriage and died on the spot – but your sister, Ezio, is still alive – just – and I am sure she is longing to see you.'

'*Calma*,' said Machiavelli as the two men looked at each other. Ezio's blood boiled. He'd spent a day trying to trace the diehards only to be led straight to them.

He dug his fingernails into his palms.

'Where is she, *bastardi* ?' he yelled.

'Come in.'

Cautiously, the two Assassins approached the dark entrance.

There was a dimly lit hall, in whose centre, on a plinth, was a bust of Pope Alexander VI by Adkingnono (as Machiavelli guessed), the coarse features – the hooked nose, the weak chin, the fat lips – done to the life. There was no other furniture, and again there were three doors leading off the three walls facing the

entrance; only that facing the entrance was open. Ezio and Machiavelli made for it and, passing through the door, found themselves in another bleak room. There was a table, on which various rusty surgical instruments were arrayed on a stained cloth, glittering under the light of a single candle. Next to it was a chair, and on it Claudia was seated, half undressed and bound, her hands in her lap, her face and breasts bruised, a gag in her mouth.

Three men detached themselves from the shadows that obscured the back wall. Ezio and Machiavelli were aware of others, too, men and women, behind them and on either side. Those they could see in the dim light wore the now grubby colours of the Borgia and all were heavily armed.

Claudia's eyes spoke to Ezio's. She managed to wrestle her branded finger free enough to show him: she had not given in, despite the torture. She was a true Assassin. Why had he ever doubted her?

'We know how you feel about your family,' said the chief diehard, a gaunt man of perhaps fifty summers whom Ezio did not recognize. 'You let your father and brothers die. Your mother we need not bother about as she is dying anyway. But you can still save your sister. If you wish. She's already well struck in years and doesn't even have any children, so perhaps you won't bother.'

Ezio controlled himself. 'What do you want?'

'In exchange? I want you to leave Rome. Why don't you go back to Monteriggioni and build the place up again? Do some farming. Leave the power game to those who understand it.'

Ezio spat.

'Oh dear,' said the thin man. He seized Claudia by the hair and, producing a small knife, cut her left breast.

Claudia screamed.

'She's damaged goods at the moment, but I'm sure she'll recover under your tender care.'

'I'll take her back and then I'll kill you. Slowly.'

'Ezio Auditore! I gave you a chance, but you threaten me – and you are in no position to threaten. If there's any killing to be done, it will be by me. Forget Monteriggioni – a sophisticated lady like *Madonna* Claudia would doubtless hate it there anyway – your destiny is here: to die in this room.'

The men and women on each side closed in, drawing swords.

'I told you – we're trapped,' said Machiavelli.

'At least we've found the bastards,' replied Ezio, as each man looked the other in the eye. 'Here!' He flung a handful of poison darts to his companion. 'Make them work.'

'You didn't tell me you came prepared.'

‘You didn’t ask.’

‘I did.’

‘Shut up.’

Ezio fell into a crouch as the diehards advanced. Their leader held the thin knife to Claudia’s throat.

‘Let’s go!’

As one, they drew their swords. And with their other hands they threw the poison darts with deathly aim.

The Borgia supporters toppled on either side, as Machiavelli closed in, slicing and slashing with his sword and dagger, pushing against the diehards who tried to crush him – in vain – by force of numbers.

Ezio had one goal – to kill the thin man before he could rip open Claudia’s throat. He leapt forward, seizing the man by the gizzard, but his adversary was as slippery as an eel and wrenched himself to one side without letting go of his victim.

Ezio finally managed to wrestle him to the floor and, grasping his right hand in his left, forced the point of the thin knife the man was holding close to his own throat. Its point touched the jugular artery.

‘Have mercy,’ babbled the diehard leader. ‘I served a cause I thought was true.’

‘How much mercy would you have shown my sister?’ asked Ezio. ‘You filth! You are finished.’

There was no need to release the Hidden Blade. ‘I told you it would be a slow death,’ said Ezio, drawing the knife down to the man’s groin, ‘but I am going to be merciful.’ He slid the knife back up and sliced the man’s throat open. Blood bubbled in the man’s mouth. ‘*Bastardo!* ’ he gurgled. ‘You will die by Micheletto’s hand!’

‘*Requiescat in Pace*,’ said Ezio, letting the man’s head fall, though for once he spoke the words without much conviction.

The other diehards lay dead or dying about them as Machiavelli and Ezio hastened to untie the harsh cords that bound Claudia.

She had been badly beaten, but the diehards had at least drawn a line at leaving her honour intact.

‘Oh, Ezio.’

‘Are you all right?’

‘I hope so.’

‘Come on. We must get out of here.’

‘Gently.’

‘Of course.’

Ezio took his sister in his arms and, followed by a sombre Machiavelli, walked out into the dying light of day.

‘Well,’ said Machiavelli, ‘at least we know for sure that Micheletto is still alive.’

51

‘We’ve found Micheletto,’ said La Volpe.

‘Where?’ Ezio’s voice was urgent.

‘He’s holed up in Zagarolo, just to the east of here.’

‘Let’s get him then.’

‘Not so fast. He’s got contingents from the Romagna towns still loyal to Cesare. He’ll put up a fight,’ La Volpe warned.

‘Let him.’

‘We’ll have to organize.’

‘Then let’s do it. Now!’

Ezio, with Machiavelli and La Volpe, summoned a meeting on Tiber Island that night. Bartolomeo was still in Ostia, watching the port, and Claudia was resting up at The Rosa in Fiore, tended by her ailing mother after her terrible ordeal. There were enough thieves and recruits to muster a force of one hundred men and women able to bear arms, and there was no need of other *condottieri* to back them up.

‘He’s encamped in the old gladiatorial school, Ludus Magnus, and he’s got maybe two hundred and fifty men with him.’

‘What does he intend to do?’ Ezio wondered.

‘No idea. Break out, head for safety in the north with the French, who knows?’

‘Whatever his plans are, let’s nip them in the bud.’

By early dawn, Ezio had gathered a mounted force. They rode out the short distance to Zagarolo and had surrounded Micheletto’s encampment by sunrise. Ezio bore his crossbow on one arm, over the Bracer, and, on the other, his Poison Blade. There would be no quarter taken, though he wanted to take Micheletto alive.

The defenders put up a fierce fight, but in the end Ezio’s forces were victorious, scattering the diehards under Micheletto’s command like chaff.

Among the wounded, dead and dying, Micheletto stood proud, defiant to the last.

‘We take you, Micheletto da Corella, as our prisoner,’ said Machiavelli. ‘No more shall you infect our nation with your schemes.’

‘Chains will never hold me,’ snarled Micheletto. ‘Any more than they will hold my master.’

They took him in chains to Florence, where he took up residence in the cells of the Signoria, in the very cell where Ezio’s father Giovanni had spent his last hours. There, the governor of the city, Piero Soderini, together with his friend and adviser Amerigo Vespucci, and Machiavelli, interrogated and tortured him, but they could get nothing out of him and so, for the moment, they left him to rot. His days as a killer seemed done.

Ezio, for his part, returned to Rome.

‘I know you are a Florentine at heart, Niccolò,’ he told his friend at their parting, ‘but I shall miss you.’

‘I am also an Assassin,’ replied Machiavelli. ‘And my first loyalty will always be to the Brotherhood. Let me know when you next have need of me and I will come to you without delay. Besides,’ he added darkly, ‘I haven’t given up all hope of squeezing information out of that vile man.’

‘I wish you luck,’ said Ezio.

He wasn’t so sure they’d break him. Micheletto might be an evil man, but he was also very strong-willed.

52

‘Ezio, you must put Micheletto out of your mind,’ Leonardo told him as they sat in the Ezio’s studio in Rome. ‘Rome is at peace. This Pope is strong. He has subdued the Romagna. He is a soldier as much as he is a man of God, and perhaps under him all Italy will find peace at last. And although Spain controls the south, Ferdinand and Isabella are our friends.’

Ezio knew that Leonardo was happy in his work. Pope Julius had employed him as a military engineer and he was tinkering with a host of new projects, though he sometimes pined for his beloved Milan, which was still in French hands, and talked in his more depressed moments of going to Amboise, where he had been offered all the facilities he needed whenever he wanted them. He often talked of going once he had finished Pope Julius’s commissions.

As for the Romagna, Ezio’s thoughts turned often to Caterina Sforza, whom he still loved. A letter he’d received from her told him that she was now involved with the Florentine ambassador. Ezio knew her life remained in turmoil and that, despite Julius’s support, she had been dismissed from Forlì by her own people on account of the cruelty she had displayed when putting down the rebellion against her late intractable second husband, Girolamo Feo, and that she was growing old in retirement now, in Florence. At first his letters to her were angry, then remonstrative, then pleading, but she replied to none of them, and finally he accepted that she had used him and that he would never see her again.

Thus it was with relationships between men and women. The lucky ones last, but too often when they end, they end for good, and deep intimacy is replaced by a desert.

Ezio was hurt and humiliated, but he didn’t have time to wallow in his misery. His work in Rome consolidating the Brotherhood, and above all holding it in readiness, kept him busy.

‘I believe that as long as Micheletto lives, he will do his best to escape, free Cesare Borgia, and help him rebuild his forces,’ Ezio maintained.

Leonardo had problems of his own, regarding his feckless boyfriend, Salai, and barely listened to his old friend. ‘No one has ever escaped from the prison in Florence,’ he said. ‘Not from those cells.’

‘Why don’t they kill him?’

‘They still think they might get something out of him, though personally I doubt it,’ said Leonardo. ‘In any case, the Borgia are finished. You should rest. Why don’t you take your poor sister and return to Monteriggioni?’

‘She has grown to love Rome and would never return to such a small place now, and, in any case, the Brotherhood’s new home is here.’

This was another sadness in Ezio’s life. After an illness, his mother, Maria, had died. Claudia, after her abduction at the hands of the Borgia diehards, had given up The Rosa in Fiore, and the brothel was now controlled by Julius’s own network of spies, who used different girls. La Volpe had negotiated with his colleague Antonio in Venice to send Rosa, now older and statelier but no less fiery than she had been when Ezio knew her in La Serenissima, to Rome to run it.

There was also the problem of the Apple.

So much had changed, and when Ezio was summoned to the Vatican for an interview with the Pope, he was unprepared for what he would hear.

‘I’m intrigued by this device you’ve got, said Julius, coming as always straight to the point.

‘What do you mean, Your Holiness?’

The Pope smiled. ‘Don’t prevaricate with me, my dear Ezio. I have my own sources and they tell me you have something you call the Apple which you found under the Sistine Chapel some years ago. It seems to have great power.’

Ezio’s brain raced. How had Julius found out about the Apple? Had Leonardo told him? Leonardo could be curiously innocent at times, and he had wanted a new patron very badly. ‘It was vouchsafed to me, in a manner I find hard to explain to you, by a force from an antique world to help us. And it has, but I fear its potential. I cannot think that the hands of Man are ready for such a thing, but it is known as a Piece of Eden. There are other pieces, some lost to us and others perhaps left hidden.’

‘It sounds very useful. What does it do?’

‘It has the ability to control men’s thoughts and desires. But that is not all: it is able to reveal things undreamed of.’

Julius pondered this. ‘It sounds as if it might be very useful to me. Very useful indeed. But it could also be used *against* me in the wrong hands.’

‘It is what the Borgia were misusing when they tried to gain total ascendancy. Luckily, Leonardo, to whom they gave it to research, kept its darkest secrets from them.’

The Pope paused once again in thought. ‘Then I think it better if we leave it in your care,’ he said at last. ‘If it was vouchsafed to you by such a power as you

describe, it would be rash to take it away from you.' He paused again. 'It seems to me that, when you feel you have no further use for it, you should hide it in a safe place, and maybe, if you wish, leave some kind of clue for any worthy successor – possibly a descendant of yours – who perhaps alone will be able to understand it, so that it may once more have a use in the world for future generations. For I do believe, Ezio Auditore – and perhaps I am being guided by God in this – that in our time, no one but you should have custody of it. It may be that there is some unique quality, some sense that enables you to withstand using it irresponsibly.'

Ezio bowed and said nothing, but in his heart he acknowledged Julius's wisdom, and he couldn't have agreed more with his judgement.

'By the way,' Julius said, 'I don't care for Leonardo's boyfriend – what's his name? Salai? He seems very shifty to me and I wouldn't trust him. It's a pity Leo seems to, for apart from that one little weakness the man is a genius. Do you know, he's developing some kind of lightweight, bulletproof armour for me? I don't know where he gets his ideas from.'

Ezio thought of the Codex Brace Leonardo had re-created for him and he smiled to himself. Well, why not? Now he could guess the source of the Pope's information about the Apple, and he knew that Julius had revealed it deliberately. Fortunately, Salai was more of a fool than a knave, but he'd have to be watched all the same, and, if necessary, removed.

After all, he knew what the nickname Salai meant: 'little satan'.

53

Ezio made his way back to Leonardo's studio soon after his audience with the Pope, but he failed to find Salai at home, and Leonardo was shamefaced about him. He had sent Salai into the country and no amount of persuasion would get him to reveal where. This would have to be a problem for La Volpe and his Thieves' Guild to deal with. It was clear that Leonardo was embarrassed. Perhaps he would learn to keep his mouth shut in front of the boy in future, for he knew that Ezio could get Leonardo into a deal of trouble. Fortunately Leonardo was still more of a help than a hindrance, and a good friend, too, and Ezio made this very clear to him. But if there were any more breaches of security – well, no one was indispensable.

Leonardo wanted to make it up to Ezio, though.

'I've been thinking about Cesare,' he said, with his usual eagerness.

'Oh?'

'In fact I'm very glad you've come. I've found someone I think you should meet.'

'Does he know where Cesare is?' asked Ezio.

If he did, thought Ezio, Micheletto would cease to matter. If he didn't, Ezio might even consider letting Micheletto escape from prison – for Ezio knew the *Signoria* well – and using the man to lead him to his master. It was a dangerous plan, he knew, but he wasn't going to use the Apple except as a last resort. He found the burden of the Piece of Eden increasingly disturbing, having had a series of strange dreams, of countries and buildings and technology that couldn't possibly exist … Then he remembered the vision of the castle, the remote castle in a foreign land. That at least was a recognizable building of his own time. But where could it be?

Leonardo brought him back from his musings.

'I don't know if he knows where Cesare is. But he's called Gaspar Torella, and he was Cesare's personal physician. He's got some ideas I think are interesting. Shall we go and see him?'

'Any lead is a good one.'

Dottore Torella received them in a spacious surgery on the Appenine, whose ceiling was hung with herbs, but also with strange creatures such as dried bats, the little corpses of desiccated toads and even a small crocodile. Torella was wizened and a little bent in the shoulders, but he was younger than he looked, his movements were quick, almost lizard-like, and the eyes behind his spectacles were bright. He was also another Spanish expatriate, but he was reputed to be brilliant, so Pope Julius had spared him – he was, after all, a scientist with no interest in politics.

What he was interested in, and talked about at length, was the New Disease.

'You know, both my former master and his father Rodrigo had it. It's very ugly indeed in its final stages, and I believe it affects the mind, and may have left both Cesare and the former Pope affected in the brain. Neither had any sense of proportion, and it may still be strong in Cesare – wherever they've put him.'

'Do you have any idea?'

'My guess is somewhere as far away as possible, and in a place he could never escape from.'

Ezio sighed. So much was surely obvious.

'I have called the disease the *morbus gallicus* – the French disease,' Dr Torella plunged on enthusiastically. 'Even the present Pope has it in the early stages and I am treating him. It's an epidemic, of course. We think it came from Columbus's sailors, and probably Vespucci's too, about seven or eight years ago when they brought it back from the New World.'

'Why call it the French disease then?' asked Leonardo.

'Well, I certainly don't want to insult the Italians, and the Portuguese and the Spanish are our friends. But it broke out first among French soldiers in Naples. It starts with lesions on the genitals and it can deform the hands, the back and the face, indeed the whole head. I'm treating it with mercury, to be drunk or rubbed on the skin, but I don't think I've found a cure.'

'That is certainly interesting,' said Ezio. 'But will it kill Cesare?'

'I don't know.'

'Then I must still find him.'

'Fascinating,' said Leonardo, excited by yet another new discovery.

'There is something else I've been working on,' said Torella, 'which I think is even more interesting.'

'What is it?' asked his fellow scientist.

'It's this: that people's memories can be passed down – preserved – from generation to generation in the bloodline. Rather like some diseases. I like to think I'll find a cure for *morbus gallicus*, but I feel it may be with us for centuries.'

‘What makes you say that?’ said Ezio, strangely disturbed by the man’s remark about memories being passed down through the generations.

‘Because I believe it’s transmitted, in the first instance, through sex – and we’d all die out if we had to do without that.’

Ezio grew impatient. ‘Thank you for your time,’ he said.

‘Don’t mention it,’ replied Torella. ‘And by the way, if you really want to find my former master, I think you could do worse than look in Spain.’

‘In Spain? Where in Spain?’

The doctor spread his hands. ‘I’m a Spaniard, so is Cesare. Why not send him home? It’s just a hunch. I’m sorry I can’t be more specific.’

Ezio thought, *It would be like looking for a needle in a haystack* … But it may be a start.

54

Ezio no longer kept the location of his lodgings a total secret, but only a few knew where they were. One of them was Machiavelli. One night Ezio was awoken by him at four in the morning when there was a deliberate, urgent knocking at the door.

‘Niccolò! What are you doing here?’ Ezio was instantly alert, like a cat.

‘I have been a fool.’

‘What happened? You were working in Florence – you can’t be back so soon.’ Ezio already knew something grave must have happened.

‘I have been a fool,’ Machiavelli repeated.

‘What’s going on?’

‘In my arrogance, I kept Micheletto alive,’ sighed Machiavelli. ‘In a secure cell, to question him.’

‘You’d better tell me what’s going on.’

‘He has escaped! On the eve of his execution!’

‘From the *Signoria*? How?’

‘Over the roof. Borgia diehards climbed onto it during the night and killed the guards, then they lowered a rope. The priest who gave him his last confession was a Borgia sympathizer – he’s being burnt at the stake today – and he smuggled a file into his cell. Micheletto sawed through just one bar on the window. He’s a big man, but it was enough for him to squeeze out and climb up. You know how strong he is. By the time the alarm was raised, he was nowhere to be found in the city.’

‘We must seek him out, and’ – Ezio paused, suddenly seeing an advantage in this adversity – ‘having found him, see where he runs. He may yet lead us to Cesare. He is insanely loyal, and without Cesare’s support his own power is worthless.’

‘I have light cavalry scouring the countryside even now, trying to hunt him down.’

‘But there are plenty of small pockets of Borgia diehards – like those who rescued him – willing to shelter him.’

‘I think he’s in Rome. That’s why I’ve come here.’

‘Why Rome?’

‘We have been too complacent. There are Borgia supporters here too. He will use them to make for Ostia and try to board a ship there.’

‘Bartolomeo is in Ostia; no one will escape him and his *condottieri* there. I’ll send a rider to alert him.’

‘But where will Micheletto go?’

‘Where else but Valencia, his home town.’

‘Ezio, we must be sure. We must use the Apple, now, this minute, to see if we can locate him.’

55

Ezio turned and, in the bedroom of his lodgings, out of sight of Machiavelli, he drew the Apple from its secret hiding place. Carefully, he took it out of its container with gloved hands and placed it on the table in his bedroom. Then he concentrated. Very slowly the Apple began to glow, and then its light brightened until the room was filled with a cold illumination. Next, images – dim at first and indistinct – flickered onto the wall and resolved themselves into something it had shown Ezio before.

'It's a strange, remote castle in a brown, barren landscape; very old, with a massive outer barbican, four main towers and an impregnable-looking square keep at its centre,' he explained to Machiavelli.

'Where is that *rocca*? What is the Apple telling us?' Machiavelli shouted from the other room.

'It could be anywhere,' Ezio muttered to himself. 'From the landscape, Syria perhaps? Or,' he said, as with a sudden rush of excitement he remembered Doctor Torella's words, 'Spain!' he shouted to Machiavelli. 'Spain!'

'Micheletto can't be in Spain.'

'I am certain he plans to go there.'

'Even so, we don't know where this place is. There are many, many castles in Spain, and many similar to this one. Consult the Apple again.'

But when Ezio tried again, the image remained unchanged: a solidly built castle on a hill, a good 300 years old, surrounded by a little town. The image was monochrome and all the houses, the fortress and the countryside were an almost uniform brown. There was only one spot of colour, a bright flag on a pole on the very top of the keep.

Ezio squinted at it.

A white flag with a red, ragged cross in the form of an 'X'.

His excitement mounted. 'The military standard of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain!'

'You can see their standard!' yelled Machiavelli from the other room, his voice contracting with excitement. 'Good. Now we know what country. But we

still don’t know where it *is*. Or why we’re being shown it. Is Micheletto on his way there? Ask the Apple again.’

The vision faded and was replaced by a fortified hill town, from whose fort flew a white flag crisscrossed with red chains, their links filled in yellow, which Ezio recognized as the flag of Navarre. Then there was a third and final picture: a massive, wealthy seaport, with ships drawn up on a glittering sea and an army gathering. But no clue about the exact location of any of these places.

56

Everyone was in place. Couriers rode daily between the points where the Brotherhood had set up bases. Bartolomeo was beginning to enjoy Ostia, and Pantasilea loved it. Antonio de Magianis still held the fort in Venice. Claudia had returned, for the time being, to Florence to stay with her old friend Paola, who kept an expensive house of pleasure on which The Rosa in Fiore had been modelled, and La Volpe and Rosa watched over Rome.

It was time for Machiavelli and Ezio to go hunting.

57

Leonardo was reluctant to let Ezio and Machiavelli enter his studio, but eventually he allowed them in. ‘Leo, we need your help,’ Ezio said, coming straight to the point.

‘You weren’t very pleased with me last time we met.’

‘Salai shouldn’t have told anyone about the Apple.’

‘He got drunk in a wine booth and blurted it out to impress. Most of the people around him didn’t know what he was talking about, but there was an agent of Pope Julius within earshot. He is very contrite.’

‘Where is he now?’ asked Ezio

Leonardo squared his shoulders. ‘If you want my help, I want payment.’

‘What are you talking about? What kind of payment?’

‘I want you to leave him alone. He means a lot to me, he is young, with time he will improve.’

‘He’s a little sewer rat,’ said Machiavelli.

‘Do you want my help or don’t you?’

Ezio and Machivelli looked at each other.

‘All right, Leo, but keep him on a very close rein, or by God we’ll show no mercy next time.’

‘All right. Now, what do you want me to do?

‘We’re having problems with the Apple. It isn’t as acute as it was. Could there be something wrong with it mechanically?’ asked Machiavelli.

Leonardo stroked his beard. ‘You have it with you?’

Ezio produced the box. ‘Here.’ He took it out and placed it carefully on Leonardo’s work table.

Leonardo examined it with equal care. ‘I don’t really know what this thing is,’ he conceded finally. ‘It’s dangerous, it’s a mystery and it’s very, very powerful, and yet only Ezio seems able to control it. God knows, when it was in my power in the old days under Cesare, I tried, but I only partially succeeded.’ He paused. ‘No, I don’t think the word “mechanical” describes this thing. If I weren’t more of a scientist than an artist, I’d say it had a mind of its own.’

Ezio remembered the voice that had come from the Apple. What if Leonardo were right?

‘Micheletto is on the run,’ said Ezio urgently. ‘We need to locate him, and fast. We need to pick up his trail before it’s too late.’

‘What do you think he’s planning?’

‘We are almost certain that Micheletto has decided to go to Spain to locate and liberate his master Cesare, and they will then attempt to return to power. We need to stop them,’ said Machiavelli.

‘And the Apple?’

‘Shows an image of a castle. It must be somewhere in Spain because it flies the Spanish flag, but the Apple doesn’t – or won’t, or can’t – give its location. We also saw an image of a town flying the Navarrese flag, and a seaport with an army gathering to embark there, but the Apple gave us nothing on Micheletto at all,’ said Ezio.

‘Well,’ said Leonardo. ‘Cesare can’t have jinxed it because no one’s that clever, so it must – how can I put this? – have *decided* not to be helpful.’

‘But why would it do that?’

‘Why don’t we ask it?’

Ezio once again concentrated, and this time a most divine music, sweet and high, came to his ears. ‘Can you hear it?’ he asked.

‘Hear what?’ replied the others.

Through the music came the voice he had heard before: ‘Ezio Auditore, you have done well, but I have more than played my part in your career and you must now return me. Take me to a vault you will find under the Capitoline, and leave me there to be found by future members of your Brotherhood. But be quick! You must then ride post-haste to Naples, where Micheletto is embarking for Valencia. This knowledge is my last gift to you. You have more than enough power of your own to have no further need of me. I will lie in the ground until future generations have need of me, so you must leave a sign to indicate my burial place. Farewell, Mentor of the Brotherhood! Farewell! Farewell!’

The Apple ceased to glow and looked dead, like an old leather-bound ball.

Swiftly, Ezio told his friends what had been imparted to him.

‘Naples? Why Naples?’ Leonardo asked.

‘Because it’s in Spanish territory and we have no jurisdiction there.’

‘And because he knows – somehow – that Bartolomeo is policing Ostia,’ said Ezio. ‘We must make all speed. Come!’

Dusk was falling as Machiavelli and Ezio carried the Apple in its box down into the catacombs below the Colosseum, and, passing through the dreadful gloomy rooms of the remains of Nero’s Golden House, carried torches before

them as they made their way through a maze of tunnels under the old Roman Forum to a spot near the church of San Nicola in Carcere. There they found a secret door within the crypt, and behind it was a small vaulted room, in the centre of which stood a plinth. On this they placed the Apple in its box and withdrew. Once closed, as if by magic the door ceased to be visible, even to them, but they knew where it was and near it they drew the sacred, secret symbols that only a member of the Brotherhood would understand. The same symbols they inscribed at regular intervals along their way back, and again at the mouth of the entrance near the Colosseum from which they emerged.

After meeting Leonardo again, who had insisted on joining them, they rode hard to Ostia, where they took a ship for the long coastal journey south to Naples. They arrived on Midsummer's Day, 1505 – Ezio's forty-sixth birthday.

They didn't go into the teeming, hilly town, but remained among the fortified docks, splitting up to search among the sailors, tradesmen and travellers busy about their fishing smacks, their shallops and their caravels, carracks and cogs, visiting the taverns and brothels, and all in frantic haste, for no one, Spanish, Italian or Arab, seemed to have an answer to their question: 'Have you seen a tall, thin man, with huge hands and scars on his face, seeking passage to Valencia?'

After an hour of this, they regrouped on the main quay.

'He's going to Valencia. He must be,' said Ezio through gritted teeth.

'But if he isn't?' put in Leonardo. 'And we charter a ship and sail to Valencia anyway, we might lose days and even weeks, and so lose Micheletto altogether.'

'You're right.'

The Apple didn't lie to you. He was – or, if we're lucky – *is* here. We just have to find somebody who knows for sure.'

A whore sidled up, grinning. 'We're not interested,' snapped Machiavelli.

She was a pretty blonde woman of about forty years of age – tall and slim, with dark brown eyes; long, shapely legs; small breasts; broad shoulders; and narrow hips. 'But you *are* interested in Micheletto da Corella.'

Ezio swung round on her. She looked so like Caterina that for a moment his head swam. 'What do you know?'

She snapped back with all the hardness of a whore, 'What's it worth to you?' Then came the professional smile again. 'I'm Camilla, by the way.'

'Ten ducats.'

'Twenty.'

'Twenty! You'd earn less than that in a week on your back!' snarled Machiavelli.

'Charmer. Do you want the information or not? I can see you're in a hurry.'

‘Fifteen then,’ said Ezio, pulling out his purse.

‘That’s better, *tesoro*.’

‘Information first,’ said Machiavelli as Camilla held out her hand for the money.

‘Half first.’

Ezio handed over eight ducats.

‘Generous with it,’ said the woman. ‘All right. Micheletto was here last night. He spent it with me and I’ve never earned my money harder. He was drunk, he abused me and he ran off at dawn without paying. Pistol in his belt, sword, ugly-looking dagger. Smelt pretty bad, too, but I know he had money because I guessed what he’d do and took my fee out of his purse when he finally fell asleep. Of course, the bouncers from the brothel followed him, though I think they were a little scared, so they kept their distance a bit.’

‘And?’ said Machiavelli. ‘None of this is of any use to us so far.’

‘But they kept him in sight. He must have chartered a ship the night before because he went straight to a carrack called the *Marea di Alba*, and sailed on the dawn tide.’

‘Describe him,’ said Ezio.

‘Big, huge hands – I had them round my neck so I should know – broken nose, scarred face, some of the scars seemed to make him look like he had a permanent grin. He didn’t talk much.’

‘How d’you know his name?’

‘I asked, just to make conversation, and he told me,’ she answered simply.

‘And where was he going?’

‘One of the bouncers knew one of the seamen and asked him as they were casting off.’

‘Where?’

‘Valencia.’

Valencia. Micheletto was going back to his birthplace – which was also the home town of a family called Borgia.

Ezio handed her seven more ducats. ‘I’ll remember you,’ he said. ‘If we find you’re lying, you’ll regret it.’

It was already midday. It took them another hour to find a fast caravel available for charter and agree the price. Another two hours were needed to victual and prepare the ship, then they had to wait for the next tide. A caravel is faster than a carrack, but, even so, it was early evening before the sails were raised. And the sea was choppy and the wind against them.

‘Happy birthday,’ said Leonardo to Ezio.

58

The Fates were against them, too. Their ship sailed well, but the sea remained rough and they encountered squalls that took the sails aback. The hoped-for chance of catching up with Micheletto at sea was long gone when, five days later, their battered caravel put into port at Valencia.

It was a prosperous and booming place, but none of the three – Ezio, Leonardo or Machiavelli – were familiar with it. The recently built Silk Exchange vied in grandeur with the Bell Tower, the Torres de Quart and the Palau de la Generalitat. It was then a powerful Catalan city, one of the most important trading ports in the Mediterranean Sea, but it was also confusing and teeming with Valencianos, who mingled in the busy streets with Italians, Dutch, English and Arabs, creating a babel of languages in the streets.

Fortunately the *Marea di Alba* was moored near to where the caravel docked, and the two captains were friends.

'*Ciao*, Alberto!'

'*Ciao*, Filin!'

'Bad voyage?' said Alberto, a stout man of thirty, as he stood on the poop deck of his vessel, supervising the loading of a mixed cargo of silk, and rare, expensive coffee, for the return journey.

'*Brutissimo*.'

'So I see from the state of your ship. But there'll be a good sea and a fair wind for the next week, so I'm hurrying back as soon as I can.'

'I won't be so lucky. When did you get in?'

'Two days ago.'

Ezio stepped up. 'And your passenger?'

Alberto spat. '*Che tipo brutto* – but he paid well.'

'Where is he now?'

'Gone. I know he was in the town, asking questions, but he's well-known here and he has many friends, believe it or not.' Alberto spat again. 'Not of the best sort, either.'

'I'm beginning to wish I hadn't come,' whispered Leonardo. 'One thing I am not is a man of violence.'

‘Where has he gone, do you know?’

‘He was staying at the Lobo Solitario, you could ask there.’

They disembarked and made straight for the Lone Wolf Inn, after Alberto had given them directions and added, darkly, ‘It is not a place for gentlemen.’

‘What makes you think we are gentlemen?’ said Machiavelli.

Alberto shrugged.

Ezio scanned the busy quay. Out of the corner of his eye he saw three or four shady characters watching them, causing him to check his Bracer and Hidden Blades. He slung his bag over his shoulder, leaving his arms free for his sword and dagger. Noticing this, Machiavelli did the same while Leonardo looked askance.

Together they made their way into the town, remaining on the alert even though the shady characters had disappeared.

‘Shall we stay at the same place as our quarry?’ suggested Ezio. ‘It’ll be the best place to be to find out where he is.’

The inn was located in a narrow street of tall tenements, which twisted away from one of the main thoroughfares. It was a low, dark building, in contrast to the sparkling newness of most of the rest of the town. The dark wooden door was open, giving onto a dark interior. Ezio entered first; Leonardo, reluctantly, last.

They had reached the centre of the vestibule in which furniture and a long, low counter could only just be made out, when the door behind them banged shut. The ten men who had been lurking in the shadows, their eyes already accustomed to the dark, now pounced, flinging themselves on their victims with guttural cries. Ezio and Machiavelli immediately threw down their bags and, in one movement, Machiavelli drew his sword and dagger and closed on his first assailant. The glint of blades flashed in the semi-darkness of the room, which was big enough for there to be plenty of space to move, helping both sides.

‘Leonardo!’ shouted Ezio. ‘Get behind the counter, and catch this.’

He threw his sword to Leonardo, who caught it, dropped it and picked it up again in the space of a second. Ezio unleashed the Hidden Blade as one of the men fell on him, stabbing him with it in the side and penetrating his guts. The man stumbled, clutching his belly, blood bubbling between his hands. Meanwhile, Machiavelli strode forward, holding his sword aloft. Quick as a flash he thrust his sword into the throat of his first opponent, while simultaneously slicing into the groin of a second with his other blade. The man fell to the floor with an anguished roar, fumbling vainly at his wound, while twitching with agony. Machiavelli closed in and glanced briefly at his victim, kicking out viciously and silencing the man in an instant.

The assailants drew back for a moment, surprised that their ambush had not achieved its purpose, and at the alacrity of their intended victims, then they renewed their attack with redoubled vigour. There was a cry from Machiavelli as he was cut in his sword arm from behind, but in a moment Ezio was upon his friend's assailant, plugging his dagger straight into the man's face.

The next thing Ezio knew, a big man, who smelt of prison straw and stale sweat, crept up behind him and threw a garrotte around his neck. Ezio choked and dropped his dagger, raising his hand to tear at the rope being tightened on his windpipe. Machiavelli leapt over and stabbed at the big man, cutting into him and causing him to cry out in sudden pain, but Machiavelli had missed his mark and the man was able to thrust him away. It was enough to make him lose his grip on the garrotte, though, so that Ezio was able to spring free.

The light was too dim to make out the black-cloaked forms of the surviving attackers, but the failure of their immediate assault seemed to have unnerved them.

'Get them!' an unpleasant, guttural voice said. 'We are still five against three.'

'*Sancho dieron en el pecho!*' shouted another as Ezio smashed his heavy dagger into the sternum of one flabby creature, splitting it as neatly as if it were a chicken breast. 'We are four against three. *Nos replegamos!*'

'No!' ordered the first man who had spoken. '*Aguantels mentres que m'escapi!*'

The man spoke in Catalan. The big man who had tried to strangle him. The man who still had the stink of prison clinging to him. Micheletto!

Moments later the door to the street was flung open and slammed shut again as Micheletto made his escape, momentarily silhouetted in the streetlight. Ezio rushed after him, but his path was blocked by one of the three surviving attackers, who was holding a scimitar aloft ready to bring it down on his head. Ezio was too close to wield either of his weapons effectively, so he threw himself to the side, out of the way. As he rolled to safety, the scimitar came swinging down, but the man had struck so violently, expecting the sword's path to be interrupted by a body, that it continued its trajectory, burying itself in the man's genitals. With a howl, he dropped the sword and fell to the ground, clutching his manhood in an attempt to stop the fountaining blood, and writhing in agony.

The last two men struggled with each other to reach the door in order to escape, and one succeeded; but the second, already wounded in the fight, was tripped by Machiavelli and crashed to the ground as Leonardo threw himself across him to prevent his rising. When it became clear he would not, Leonardo

stood clear and Ezio knelt and turned him over, pressing the point of the Hidden Blade into his nostril.

‘I am Ezio Auditore, Mentor of the Assassins,’ he said. ‘Tell me where your master is bound and I will show you mercy.’

‘Never!’ croaked the man.

Ezio pressed the point of the Blade in further. Its razor-sharp edges slowly beginning to slit the man’s nose.

‘Tell me!’

‘All right! He is going to the Castillo de la Mota.’

‘What is there?’

‘That is where Cesare is held prisoner.’

Ezio pushed the Blade.

‘Have mercy! I speak the truth, but you will never succeed in thwarting us. The Borgia will return to power and rule all Italy with an iron fist. They will swarm into the south and throw the filthy Spanish monarchy out, and then they will destroy the Kingdoms of Aragon and Castile and rule them too.’

‘How do you know where Cesare is? It is a dark secret known only to Pope Julius and his Council, and to King Ferdinand and his.’

‘Do you not think we have spies of our own? Even in the Vatican? They are good, these spies. This time, better than yours.’

With a sudden movement, the man brought up his right arm. In it was a small knife, which he aimed at Ezio’s heart. Ezio just had time to block the blow with his left arm, and the knife skeetered harmlessly off his Bracer and onto the floor.

‘Long Live the Royal House of Borgia!’ the man cried.

‘*Requiescat in Pace*,’ said Ezio.

‘Welcome to Valencia,’ Leonardo muttered.

59

The Lone Wolf Inn was deserted but there were beds of a sort, and as it was late by the time Ezio and his companions had recovered from the bloody tussle with Micheletto's diehards, they had no choice but to spend the night there. They found wine, water and food – bread, onions and some salami – and even Leonardo was too hungry to refuse it.

The following morning, Ezio rose early, eager to find horses for the journey ahead. Their ship's captain, Filin, was at the docks seeing to the refitting of his battered ship. He knew of the remote Castle of La Mota, and gave them directions, as far as he could, as to how to find it, but it would be a long and arduous journey of many days. Filin also helped organize their horses, but preparations still took another forty-eight hours, since they had to provision themselves as well. The journey would take them north-west across the brown sierras of central Spain. There were no maps, so they travelled from one town or village to another, using the list of names Filin had given them.

They passed out of Valencia, and after several days' hard riding on their first set of horses – Leonardo complaining bitterly – they entered the beautiful mountain country around the tiny hill town of Cuenca. Then down again onto the flat plain of Madrid, and through the royal city itself, where the bandits who tried to rob them soon found themselves dead on the road. From there they went north to Segovia, which is dominated by its Alcázar, where they spent the night as the guests of the seneschal of Queen Isabella of Castile.

They continued on through open country where they were attacked and almost robbed by a gang of Moorish highwaymen, who had somehow slipped through the fingers of King Ferdinand and survived in open country for twelve years. Ferdinand, King of Aragon, Sicily, Naples and Valencia, was founder of the Spanish Inquisition and scourge of the Jews – with dire consequences for his nation's economy – through his Grand Inquisitor, Tomás de Torquemada; but through marriage to his equally ugly wife, Isabella, he had united Aragon and Castile and begun the road to making Spain a single nation. Ferdinand had ambitions on Navarre, too, though Ezio wondered how far the bigoted king's

designs would have an impact on that country, where Cesare had such close family ties, being the brother-in-law of its French king.

Fighting weariness, they rode on, praying that they would be in time to thwart Micheletto's plan. But despite all the haste they had made, he had had a good start on them.

60

Micheletto and his small band of diehards reined in their horses and stood up in their stirrups to look at the castle of La Mota. It dominated the small town of Medina del Campo, and had been built to protect it from the Moors.

Micheletto had good eyesight, and even from that distance he could see the red scarf that Cesare had hung from his cell window. It was the topmost window in the central tower and there was no need for bars because no one had ever escaped from La Mota. You could see why. The walls had been crafted by skilled eleventh-century masons and the stone blocks were so skilfully laid that the surface was as smooth as glass.

It was good that they had devised this plan using the red scarf, otherwise it might have been hard for Micheletto to find his master. The go-between, a La Mota sergeant-of-the-guard, who'd been recruited to the Borgia cause in Valencia some time earlier, was perfect, and, once bribed, he had proved totally dependable.

Getting Cesare out was going to be difficult, though. His cell door was permanently watched by two Swiss Guards from a troop on loan from Pope Julius, all of whom were totally inflexible and incorruptible. So getting Cesare out the easy way was impossible.

Micheletto measured the height of the central tower with his eyes. Once inside the place, they'd have to scale an impossible wall to a cell 140 feet up. So, that was out. Micheletto considered the problem. He was a practical man, but his speciality was killing, not problem solving, and his thoughts led him to reflect on the main tool of his trade: rope.

'Let's ride a little closer,' he said to his companions. They'd all dressed in hunting outfits, rather than their customary black, in order to arouse little or no suspicion. He had ten men with him, and each of them carried, as part of their standard equipment, a length of rope.

'We don't want to get too close,' said his lieutenant, 'or the guards on the ramparts will see us.'

'And what will they see? A hunting party coming to Medina to revictual. Don't worry, Girolamo.'

The remark gave Micheletto the germ of an idea and he continued, ‘We’ll ride right up to the town.’

It was about half an hour’s ride, during which Micheletto was more than usually silent, his battered brow deeply furrowed. Then, as they approached the walls of the city, his face cleared.

‘Rein in,’ he said.

They did so and Micheletto looked them over. The youngest, a man of eighteen called Luca, had no hair on his chin and a tip-tilted nose. He was already a hardened killer, but his face had the innocence of a cherub.

‘Get out your ropes and measure them.’

They obeyed. Each rope measured twelve feet – 120 feet when tied securely together. Add Micheletto’s own and you had 130 feet. Cesare would have to drop the last ten feet or so, but that would be nothing to him.

The next problem was getting the rope to Cesare. For that they’d have to contact their recruit, the sergeant-of-the-guard, Juan, which wouldn’t be too hard as they knew Juan’s movements and hours of duty. That would be Luca’s job, since, as an innocent-looking young man, he’d attract the least attention – the rest of his band, though dressed like hunters, looked like the men they were: hardened thugs. Juan’s palm would have to be greased, but Micheletto always carried a contingency fund of 250 ducats, and a tenth of that should do it. For the whole job.

Juan could gain access to Cesare’s cell and deliver the rope – the Swiss Guards wouldn’t suspect him. Micheletto might even fake a letter with an official-looking seal on it, to be delivered to Cesare as cover.

The outer barbican was massive, though, and once Cesare was at the foot of the central tower, he’d have to cross the inner courtyards and get out – somehow – through the only gate.

The one good thing was that La Mota’s main function these days was to guard its single prisoner. Its original purpose had been to ward off attacks from the Moors, but that threat had long since been removed and the massive place was, in every sense other than guarding Cesare, redundant, so he knew from Juan that it was a fairly cushy posting.

They’d have to take a change of clothes to Cesare from time to time, so Micheletto thought through the possibilities of Juan organizing delivery of a ‘change of clothes’ for Cesare – a disguise to fool the guards – then maybe it might work. He could think of no other way, apart from fighting their way in, and getting Cesare out by force.

‘Luca,’ he said finally. ‘I have a job for you.’

It turned out that Juan wanted fifty ducats for the whole job, and Micheletto beat him down to forty, though he didn't waste time with too much bartering. It took Luca three trips to and fro to set the whole thing up, but finally he reported back: 'It's arranged. He's going to take the rope and a guard's uniform to Cesare when he accompanies the man who takes him his evening meal at six o'clock. The postern gate will be guarded by Juan, who's going to take the midnight-to-six gate-watch. It's a five-minute walk from the castle to the town …'

Cesare Borgia's left leg hurt from the lesions of the New Disease, but not much, just a dull ache that made him limp slightly. At 2 a.m., once he had changed into the guard's uniform, he tied one end of the rope firmly to the central mullion of the window of his cell and carefully lowered the rest out into the night. When it was all paid out, he slung his good leg over the windowsill, hauled the other one after it and took a firm grip on the rope. Sweating, despite the coolness of the night, he descended hand over hand until his ankles felt the end of the rope. He dropped the last ten feet, feeling the pain in his left leg when he landed, but he shook it off and limped across the deserted inner courtyard and through the outer one, where the sleepy guards paid him no attention, thinking him one of their own.

At the gate he was challenged, at which point his heart went to his mouth. But then Juan came to his rescue.

'It's all right. I'll take him to the guardhouse.'

What was going on? So near and yet so far.

'Don't worry,' said Juan under his breath.

The guardhouse was occupied by two sleeping guards. Juan kicked one of them into life.

'Wake up, Domingo. This man has a warrant for town. They forgot to order more straw for the stables and they need some before they ride out on the dawn patrol. Take him back to the gate, explain to the guards there and let him out.'

'Yessir!'

Cesare followed the guard out through the postern, which was then firmly locked behind him, and limped through the moonlight into the town. What joy to feel the cool night air around him after so long. He'd been confined in this dump since 1504, but he was free now. He was still only thirty; he'd get it all back, and he'd take such vengeance on his enemies, especially the Assassin Brotherhood, that he'd make Caterina Sforza's purges at Forlì make her look like a nursemaid.

He heard and smelt the horses at the appointed rendezvous. Thank God for Micheletto. Then he saw them; they were all there, in the shadows of the church

wall. They had a fine black beast ready for him. Micheletto dismounted and helped him into the saddle.

‘Welcome back, *Excellenza*,’ he said. ‘And now we must hurry. That bastard *Assassino*, Ezio Auditore, is on our heels.’

Cesare was silent. He was thinking about the slowest death he could devise for the Assassin.

‘I’ve put matters in hand already at Valencia,’ continued Micheletto.

‘Good.’

They rode off into the night, heading south-east.

61

‘He’s *escaped*!?’ Ezio had ridden the last miles to La Mota without sparing himself, his companions or their horses, but with an ever-deepening sense of apprehension. ‘After more than two years?’ *How? ’*

‘It was carefully planned, *signore*,’ said the hapless lieutenant of the castle, a plumpish man of sixty with a very red nose. ‘We are holding an official enquiry.’

‘And what have you come up with?’

‘As yet …’

But Ezio wasn’t listening. He was looking around at the Castle of la Mota. It was exactly as the Apple had depicted it. And the thought led him to remember another vision it had vouchsafed him: the gathering army at a seaport … The seaport had been Valencia!

His mind raced frantically.

He could think only of getting back to the coast as fast as possible.

‘Get me fresh horses!’ he yelled.

‘But, *signore* …’

Machiavelli and Leonardo looked at each other.

‘Ezio, whatever the urgency, we must rest, at least for a day,’ said Machiavelli.

‘A week,’ groaned Leonardo.

As matters turned out, they were delayed because Leonardo fell ill. He was exhausted and missed Italy badly. Ezio was almost tempted to abandon him, but Machiavelli counselled restraint.

‘He is your old friend, and they cannot gather an army and a fleet in under two months.’

Ezio relented.

Events were to prove him right – and to prove Leonardo invaluable.

62

Ezio and his companions were back in Valencia within a month, where they found the city in a state of uproar. Machiavelli had underestimated the speed with which things could happen in such a wealthy town.

Men had been secretly mustering and now, just outside Valencia, there was a huge camp of soldiers, maybe a thousand men. The Borgia were offering mercenaries good wages, and word had got round fast. Budding soldiers were coming in from as far away as Barcelona and Madrid, and from all over the provinces of Murcia and La Mancha. Borgia money ensured that a fleet of perhaps fifteen ships – quickly run-up troop ships with half a dozen small warships to protect them – was in the process of being built.

'Well, we don't need the Apple to tell us what our old friend Cesare is planning,' said Machiavelli.

'That's true.' He doesn't need a vast army to take Naples, and once he's established a bridgehead there, he'll recruit many more men to his cause. His plan is to conquer the kingdom of Naples, and then all Italy.'

'What are Ferdinand and Isabella doing about this?' asked Machiavelli.

'They'll be getting a force together to crush it. So we'll enlist their aid.'

'It will take too long. Their army has to march from Madrid. The garrison here must have been put out of action. But you can see that Cesare's in a hurry,' rejoined Machiavelli.

'It might not even be necessary,' mused Leonardo.

'What do you mean?'

'Bombs.'

'Bombs?' asked Machiavelli.

'Quite little bombs, but effective enough to, say, wreck ships or disperse a camp.'

'Well, if they'll do that for us …' said Ezio. 'What do you need to make them?'

'Sulphur, charcoal and potassium nitrate. And steel. Thinnish steel. Flexible. And I'll need a small studio and a furnace.'

It took them a while, but, fortunately for them, Captain Alberto's ship, the *Marea di Alba*, was tied up at its usual quay. He greeted them with a friendly wave.

'Hello again,' he said. 'Those people I told you about … the ones who aren't gentlemen. I don't suppose you heard about the fracas at the Lone Wolf shortly after you arrived?'

Ezio smiled and told him what they needed.

'Hmm. I know a man here who might be able to help you.'

'When do you return to Italy?' asked Leonardo.

'I've brought over a cargo of grappa, and I'm taking back silk again. Maybe two, three days. Why?'

'I'll tell you later.'

'Can you get what we need arranged quickly?' asked Ezio, who had a sudden sense of foreboding, though he couldn't blame Leonardo for wanting to leave.

'Certainly!'

Alberto was as good as his word, and within a few hours everything had been arranged and Leonardo settled down to work.

'How long will it take you?' asked Machiavelli.

'Two days, since I don't have any assistants. I've enough material here to make twenty, maybe twenty-one, bombs. That's ten each.'

'*Seven* each,' said Ezio.

'No my friend, ten each – one lot for you, and one for Niccolò here. You can count me out.'

Two days later, the bombs were ready. They were about the shape and size of a grapefruit, encased in steel and fitted with a catch at the top.

'How do they work?'

Leonardo smiled proudly. 'You flip this little catch – actually, it's more of a lever – you count to three, then you throw them at your target. Each of these is enough to kill twenty men and, if you hit a ship in the right place, to disable it completely, perhaps even sink it.' He paused for a moment. 'It's a pity there isn't time to build a submarine.'

'A what?'

'Never mind. Just throw it after a count of three. Don't hold on to it any longer or you'll be blown to pieces yourself!' He rose. 'And now, goodbye and good luck.'

'What?'

Leonardo smiled ruefully. 'I've had quite enough of Spain, so I've booked a passage with Alberto. He sails on this afternoon's tide. I'll see you back in Rome – if you make it.'

Ezio and Machiavelli looked at one another, then solemnly embraced Leonardo.

‘Thank you, my dear friend,’ said Ezio.

‘Don’t mention it.’

‘Thank God you didn’t build these things for Cesare,’ said Machiavelli.

After Leonardo had gone, they carefully packed the bombs – there were exactly ten each – into linen bags, which they slung over their shoulders.

‘You take the mercenaries’ encampment, I’ll take the port,’ said Ezio.

Machiavelli nodded grimly.

‘When we’ve done the job, we’ll meet at the corner of the street where the Lone Wolf is,’ said Ezio. ‘I reckon the Lone Wolf is where Cesare will have his centre of operations. Once the chaos has started, he’ll go there to regroup with his inner circle. We’ll try to corner them before they can make their escape – again.’

‘For once I’ll back your hunch,’ grinned Machiavelli. ‘Cesare is so vainglorious he won’t have thought to change the Borgia diehards’ hideout. And it’s more discreet than a *palazzo*.’

‘Good luck, friend.’

‘We’ll both need it.’

They shook hands and parted to go on their separate missions.

Ezio decided to head for the troop ships first. Blending in with the crowd, he made his way down to the port and, once on the quay, selected his first target. He took out the first bomb, fighting down the insidious doubt that it might not work, and, aware that he’d have to be fast, flipped its catch, counted to three and flung it.

He was working at close range and his aim had deadly accuracy. The bomb landed with a clatter in the belly of the ship. For a few moments nothing happened, and Ezio cursed inwardly – what if the plan failed? – but then there was an almighty explosion, the ship’s mast cracked and fell, and splintered wood was tossed high in the air.

Amid the chaos that followed, Ezio darted along the quay, selecting another ship and throwing the next bomb. In several cases, the first explosion was followed by a mightier one, as some of the troop ships had already been laden with casks of gunpowder. In one case, an exploding ship carrying gunpowder destroyed its two neighbours.

One by one, Ezio wrecked twelve ships, but the chaos and panic that ensued were of equal value. In the distance he could hear explosions, shouts and screams as Machiavelli did his work, too.

As Ezio made his way to their rendezvous, he hoped his friend had survived.

All Valencia was in uproar, but pushing his way against the flow of the crowd, Ezio made the appointed meeting place in ten minutes. Machiavelli wasn't there, but Ezio didn't have long to wait. Looking a bit shabby, and with a blackened face, his fellow Assassin soon came running up.

'May God reward Leonardo da Vinci,' he said.

'Success?'

'I have never seen such pandemonium,' replied Macchiavelli. 'The survivors are running away out of town as fast as they can. I think most of them will prefer the plough to the sword after this.'

'Good! But we still have work to do.'

They made their way down the narrow street and arrived at the door of the Lone Wolf to find it closed. Silently as cats, they climbed onto the roof. It was a one-storey building, bigger than it appeared from the front, and near the top of the pitched roof there was an open skylight. They approached it and cautiously looked over the edge.

It was a different room from the one in which they had been ambushed, with two men down below: Micheletto stood at a table, and facing him, seated, was Cesare Borgia. His once handsome face, now lacerated by the New Disease, was white with fury.

'They have destroyed my plans! Those damned Assassins! Why did you not destroy them? Why did you fail me?'

'*Excellenza*, I—' Micheletto looked like a whipped dog.

'I must make good my escape. I'll go to Viana, in Navarre, just across the border. Let them try to recapture me then. I'm not waiting here for Ferdinand's men to come and haul me back to La Mota. My brother-in-law is king of Navarre and he will surely help me.'

'*I* will help you, as I have always helped you. Only let me come with you.'

Cesare's cruel lips curled. 'You got me out of La Mota, sure, and you built up my hopes. But now look where you have got me!'

'Master, all my men are dead. I have done what I could.'

'And failed!'

Micheletto went white. 'Is this my reward? For all my years of faithful service?'

'You dog, get out of my sight. I discard you! Go and find some gutter to die in.'

With a cry of rage, Micheletto hurled himself at Cesare, his huge, strangler's hands flexed to close on his former master's throat. But they never got there. With lightning speed, Cesare whipped out one of the two pistols he had in his belt and fired at point blank range.

Micheletto's face was destroyed beyond all recognition. The rest of his body crashed over the table. Cesare sprang back, out of his chair, to avoid being covered in blood.

Ezio had drawn back, so as to be invisible but not out of earshot, and was preparing to leap from the roof and grab Cesare as he came out of the front door of the inn. But Machiavelli had craned forward to get a better view of the dreadful showdown, and now he inadvertently kicked a tile loose, alerting Cesare.

Cesare looked up swiftly and drew his second pistol. Machiavelli didn't have time to draw back before Cesare fired, shooting him through the shoulder and smashing his collarbone before he fled.

Ezio thought of pursuit, but only for an instant. He had heard Cesare say that he intended to go to Viana, and he would follow him there, but not before he had seen to his wounded friend.

Machiavelli groaned apologies of all things, as Ezio managed to haul him off the roof. At least he could walk, though the wound was bad.

Once they reached the main thoroughfare, Ezio accosted a passer-by, having to stop the man by force as the chaos raged around them.

'I need a doctor,' he said urgently. 'Where can I find one?'

'Many people need a doctor!' replied the man.

Ezio shook him. 'My friend is badly wounded. Where can I find a doctor? Now!'

'Let go of me! You could try *el médico* Acosta. His rooms are just down the street. There's a sign outside.'

Ezio grabbed the near-fainting Macchiavelli and supported him. He took his scarf from his tunic and with it staunched the wound as best he could. Niccolò was losing a lot of blood.

The minute he saw the wound, Acosta had Machiavelli sit in a chair. He took a bottle of alcohol and some swabs and carefully dressed it.

'The ball went right through the shoulder,' he explained in broken Italian. 'So at least I won't have to dig it out. And it's a clean wound. But as for the collarbone, I'll have to reset it. I hope you're not planning on travelling at any time soon?'

Ezio and Machiavelli exchanged a glance.

'I have been a fool again,' said Machiavelli, forcing a grin.

'Shut up, Niccolò.'

'Go on. Get after him. I'll manage.'

'He can stay here with me. I have a small annexe that needs a patient,' said Acosta. 'And when he's healed, I'll send him after you.'

‘How long?’

‘Perhaps two weeks, maybe more.’

‘I’ll see you in Rome,’ said Machiavelli.

‘All right,’ replied Ezio. ‘Take care of yourself, my friend.’

‘Kill him for me,’ said Machiavelli. ‘Though at least he spared us the trouble of Micheletto.’

Part Three

We have reached the last era in prophetic song. Time has conceived, and the great sequence of the ages starts afresh. Justice, the virgin, comes back to dwell with us, and the rule of Saturn is restored. The Firstborn of the New Age is already on his way from high heaven down to earth.

Virgil, *Eclogues, IV*

63

Ezio once again travelled across Spain on a long and lonely journey, almost due north to Viana. He arrived there in the month of March, in the year of Our Lord 1507. The city that he saw, a mile or so distant, looked exactly like the one in the vision accorded him by the Apple, with strong walls and a well-fortified citadel at its centre, but there was a difference.

Even before he crossed the border into Navarre, Ezio's practised eyes told him the city was under siege. When he came to a village, most of the locals just shook their heads dumbly when questioned, but when he sought out the priest, with whom he was able to converse in Latin, he learned the whole picture.

'You may know that our King and Queen have designs on Navarre. It's a rich land and they want to incorporate it into Spain.'

'So they want to take Viana?'

'They've already taken it. It's occupied by the Count of Lerin on their behalf.'

'And the besiegers?'

'They are Navarrese forces. I think they will be the victors.'

'What makes you say that?'

'Because they are under the command of the brother-in-law of the King of Navarre, and he is an experienced general.'

Ezio's heart beat faster, but he still needed confirmation: 'His name?'

'He's very famous, apparently. The Duke of Valence, Cesare Borgia. They say he once commanded the army of the Pope himself. But the Spanish troops are brave. They have taken the fight out to the enemy, and there have been bloody battles in the fields outside the town. I would not go any further in that direction, my son; there lies only devastation and blood.'

Ezio thanked him and spurred his horse forward.

He arrived at the scene to find a pitched battle going on right in front of him, while a fog swirled around them. In its midst, Cesare Borgia took a stand, hacking down any foe who came at him. Suddenly Ezio himself had to fight another horseman – a Navarrese, with his crest bearing a red shield crisscrossed with yellow chains. Ezio slashed at the man with his sword, but his foe ducked

just in time to miss the blade and Ezio nearly toppled over from the momentum. Recovering just in time, Ezio manoeuvred his horse round and back towards the man. The horseman was pulling his sword arm back to strike a blow at Ezio's open flank, but Ezio lunged at him with a lightning flick of his sword arm. The tip of his sword slashed into the man's chest, and he pulled back in pain, allowing Ezio to deliver a mighty blow downwards, splitting his foe's right shoulder down to his chest. He fell without a cry and was finished off by the Spanish infantrymen.

Cesare was on foot, and Ezio decided that it would be easier to get close to him undetected if he were also on foot, so he dismounted and ran through the fray towards him.

At last he stood face to face with his deadly foe. Cesare's face was streaked with blood and dust and strained with exertion, but when he saw Ezio his expression took on a new determination.

'Assassin! How did you find me?'

'My thirst to avenge Mario Auditore led me to you.'

They sliced at each other with their swords until Ezio managed to knock Cesare's weapon out of his hand. Then, sheathing his own, he flung himself on the Borgia, putting his hands around his throat. Cesare had learnt a few things from Micheletto about the art of strangling, though, and he managed to free himself by thrusting Ezio's arms away. Ezio unleashed the Hidden Blade, but Cesare caught the blow, once again successfully defending himself, as the battle raged about them.

It was then that the Spanish trumpets sounded the retreat. Triumphant, Cesare yelled to the nearest Navarrese troops, 'Kill him! Kill the Assassin. Tear the *maldito bastardo* into pieces!' As the fog increased, so Cesare melted into it and the Navarrese soldiers closed in on Ezio. He fought them off long and hard before exhaustion overwhelmed him, then he fell to the ground, almost unnoticed as the melee and fog swirled around him and the soldiers left him for dead.

When Ezio came to, some time later, he was lying on his back in the middle of the battlefield; he had to push a corpse off him before he could sit up.

The battlefield lay under a cloudy, blood-red sky, and, in the distance, the sun burned angrily. Dust hung in the air over a wide, unmade road, littered with the dead.

Ezio saw a crow standing on a corpse's chin, pecking hungrily at its eye. A riderless horse stampeded by, driven mad by the smell of blood. Broken banners snapped in the breeze.

Groaning with the effort, he stood up and, painfully at first, walked through the field of dead. He found that he had lost his sword and dagger, though the Hidden Blade and the Bracer had not been found and looted.

His first job was to replace his weapons. Near him, he noticed a peasant sifting through the spoils of battle. The peasant looked at him.

‘Help yourself,’ he said. ‘There’s more than enough to go round.’

Ezio looked for fallen officers and knights, as they would be better armed, but in every case someone had got there before him. At last he found a dead captain with a fine sword and a dagger similar to his own. These he took gratefully.

Next he went in search of a horse as it would be quicker to get around that way. He was in luck. Not half a mile from the edge of the battlefield, well away from the Navarrese camp, he came across a fully saddled and bridled warhorse, its back bloodstained, but not with its own blood, grazing in a green field. Talking to it gently, he mounted it. It kicked a little at first, but he soothed it quickly, then rode it back the way he had come.

Back on the battlefield, he encountered more peasants recovering what they could from the bodies. He passed them and galloped uphill towards the sound of another fight. The crest of the hill revealed a level plain below it where the battle had been rejoined, close to the battlemented walls of the town, from where cannon-fire issued.

64

Ezio steered his horse to one side of the battle, through some olive groves, where he encountered a patrol of Navarrese troops. Before he had time to turn round, they had fired their muskets at him, missing him, but cutting his horse down from under him.

He managed to escape amongst the trees and continued on foot, taking care to avoid the Spanish troops, who were prowling everywhere. Creeping closer, he came to a clearing, in which he saw one Spanish soldier lying wounded on the ground while another did his best to comfort him.

'*Por favor*,' said the wounded man. 'My legs. Why won't the bleeding stop?'

'*Compadre*, I have done all I can for you. Now you must trust in God.'

'Oh, Pablo, I'm afraid! *Mis piernas! Mis piernas!*'

'Quiet now, Miguel. Think of all the money we'll get when we've won the battle. And the booty!'

'Who is this old man we are fighting for?'

'Who? *El Conde de* Lerin?'

'Yes. We are fighting for him, aren't we?'

'Yes, my friend. He serves our King and Queen, and we serve him, so we fight.'

'Pablo, the only thing I'm fighting for now is my life.'

A patrol arrived on the other side of the clearing.

'Keep moving,' said its sergeant. 'We must outflank them.'

'My friend is wounded,' said Pablo. 'He cannot move.'

'Then leave him. Come on.'

'Give me a few more minutes.'

'Very well. We head north. Follow us. And be sure no Navarrese sees you.'

'Will we know when we have outflanked them?'

'There will be gunfire. We'll cut them down where they least expect it. Use the trees for cover.'

'Just a moment, sir.'

'What is it?'

'I will follow now.'

‘Immediately?’

‘Yes, sir. My comrade Miguel is dead.’

Once they had gone, Ezio waited for a few minutes, then made his way north before veering east, in the direction he knew Viana lay. He left the olive groves and saw that he had passed the field of battle and was skirting it on its northern side. He wondered what had become of the Spanish soldiers, for there was no sign of any successful outflanking movement and the battle seemed to be going to the Navarrese.

On his way lay a shattered village. He avoided it, as he could see Spanish snipers concealed behind some of the charred and broken walls, using long-muzzled wheel-locks to fire on any Navarrese troops at the edge of the battle.

He came across a soldier, his tunic so bloodstained that Ezio could not tell what side he was on, sitting with his back to a stray olive tree and hugging himself in agony, his whole body shaking, his gun abandoned on the ground.

Reaching the outskirts of the town, among the settlements that crouched beneath its bastions, Ezio finally saw his quarry ahead of him. Cesare was with a Navarrese sergeant and was clearly assessing the best way of breaching or undermining Viana’s massive walls.

The Spanish, who had taken Viana, had been confident enough to allow some of their camp followers to settle in the houses here, but they were evidently not powerful enough to protect them now.

Suddenly a woman came out of one of the cottages and ran towards them, screaming and blocking their path.

‘*Ayúdenme!*’ she cried. ‘Help me! My son! My son is wounded!’

The sergeant went up to the woman and, seizing her by the hair, dragged her out of Cesare’s way.

‘*Ayúdenme!*’ she yelled.

‘Shut her up, will you?’ said Cesare, surveying her coldly.

The sergeant drew his dagger and slit the woman’s throat.

65

As Ezio shadowed Cesare, he witnessed further scenes of brutality doled out by the Navarrese troops on the hated Spanish interlopers.

He saw a young woman being roughly manhandled by a Navarrese trooper.

‘Leave me in peace!’ she cried.

‘Be a good girl,’ the soldier told her brutally. ‘I will not hurt you! In fact, you might even enjoy it, you Spanish whore.’

Further along, a man, a cook by the look of him, stood in despair as two soldiers held him and forced him to watch two others set fire to his house.

Worse still was a man – doubtless a wounded Spanish soldier who had had his legs amputated – being kicked out of his cart by a pair of Navarrese squaddies. They stood there laughing as he desperately tried to drag himself away from them along a footpath.

‘Run! Run!’ said one.

‘Can’t you go any faster?’ added his comrade.

The battle had obviously gone to the Navarrese, because Ezio could see them bringing siege towers up to the walls of the city. Navarrese troops were swarming up them and there was fierce fighting on the battlements already. If Cesare were anywhere, it would be at the head of his men, for he was as ferocious and fearless as he was cruel.

Somewhere behind him, a Spanish preacher intoned to a despairing congregation: ‘You have brought this on yourselves through sin. This is how the Lord punishes you. Ours is a just God and this is His justice. Praise the Lord! Thank you, God, for teaching us to be humble. To see our punishment for what it is, a call to spirituality. The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. So is the Truth written. Amen!’

The only way into the city is up one of those towers, thought Ezio. The one nearest him had just been pushed up to the wall and, running, Ezio joined the men rushing up it, blending in with them, though there was scarcely any need, for amidst all the roaring and bellowing of the pumped-up besiegers, who scented victory at last, he would not have been noticed.

The defenders were ready for them now, though and began pouring the mixture of pitch and oil they call Greek Fire down onto the enemy below. The screams of burning men came up to those already on the tower, Ezio among them, and the rush upwards, away from the flames burning the base of the tower became frantic. Around him, Ezio saw men push their fellows out of the way in order to survive, and some soldiers fell, howling, into the flames below.

Ezio knew he had to get to the top before the flames caught up with him. Reaching it, he took a great leap of faith onto the battlements just as the blazing tower collapsed behind him, causing murderous chaos beneath.

There was fierce fighting on the ramparts, but already hundreds of Navarrese soldiers had got down into the town itself, and the Spanish trumpets were sounding the retreat into the citadel at the centre of Viana. The town seemed as good as retaken.

Cesare would be triumphant, and his wealthy brother-in-law would doubtless reward him richly. Ezio would not allow that to happen.

Running along the high wall, Ezio ducked and dived among the fighting soldiers as the Navarrese cut down the Spanish troops who had been left behind in the retreat. Ezio located Cesare, cutting his way through enemy troops as a child uses a stick to smash through tall grass. Cesare was impatient to take the citadel and, once clear of the men who attempted to block his way, he sped down a stairway on the inner wall and through the town, with Ezio seconds behind him.

Ahead of them, the citadel had already opened its doors. All the fight had gone out of the Spanish, and the Count of Lerin was ready to parlay. But Cesare was not a merciful man.

‘Kill them! Kill them all!’ he shouted to his troops. With superhuman speed, he ran into the citadel and up the narrow stone staircases within it, cutting down anyone who got in his way.

Ezio kept pace with him until they reached the topmost battlements of the citadel, where Cesare stood alone, cutting down the flagpole bearing the Spanish flag. When he turned there was but one way out, and there stood Ezio, blocking it.

‘There is nowhere for you to run, Cesare,’ said Ezio. ‘It is time to pay your debts.’

‘Come on then, Ezio!’ snarled Cesare. ‘You brought down my family. Let’s see how you settle *your* debts.’

Such was their impatient fury, they closed on each other immediately, man to man, using only their fists as weapons.

Cesare got the first blow in, his right fist swinging wildly at Ezio's head. Ezio ducked under the punch, but a fraction too late, so that Cesare's knuckles glanced off the Assassin's temple. Ezio staggered, giving Cesare cause to cry out in triumph: 'No matter what you do, I will conquer all, but first I will kill you and everyone you hold dear. As for me, I cannot die. *Fortuna* will not fail me!'

'Your hour is come, Cesare,' Ezio replied. Recovering his composure and stepping back, he drew his sword.

Cesare loosed his own blade in response and the two men began to fight in earnest. Ezio swung his blade viciously towards his foe's head, the blade sweeping a lethal flat arc through the air. Cesare was shocked by the speed of the attack, but managed to raise his own blade in a clumsy parry, his arm shuddering with the impact. Ezio's sword bounced away and Cesare thrust with his own attack, his balance and focus regained. The men circled on the parapet, flicking the tips of their swords in a swift burst of swordplay. Ezio stepped quickly forward, leading Cesare's blade off to the right, then twisting his wrist and aiming the point of his sword towards Cesare's exposed left flank. Cesare was too quick, though, and slapped Ezio's sword aside. Then he used the opening to flick his blade at Ezio, who responded by raising his wrist and using the Bracer to deflect the blow. Both men stepped back, wary once again. Cesare's skill as a swordsman had clearly not been hampered by the New Disease.

'Pah, old man. Your generation is finished. It is my turn now, and I will not wait any longer. Your antiquated systems, your rules and hierarchies – all of them must go.'

Both men were tiring, and they confronted each other, panting.

Ezio replied, 'Your new regime will bring tyranny and misery to all.'

'I know what is best for the people of Italy, not a bunch of old men who wasted their energy fighting to get to the top years ago.'

'Your mistakes are worse than theirs.'

'I do not *make* mistakes. I am the Enlightened One!'

'Enlightenment comes through years of thought, not through blind conviction.'

'Ezio Auditore, your time has come!'

Cesare slashed with his sword, striking an unexpected and cowardly blow, but Ezio was just quick enough to parry, carry through and, catching Cesare off-balance, seize his wrist and wrench the sword from his grip, sending it clattering to the flagstones.

They were on the edge of the battlements, and, far below, Navarrese troops were beginning to celebrate. There was no looting, though, for they had regained a town which was their own.

Cesare went for his dagger, but Ezio slashed at his opponent's wrist with his sword, cutting into the tendons so that it hung limply, disabled. Cesare staggered back and his face grimaced with pain and anger.

'The throne was mine!' he said, like a child who has lost a toy.

'Wanting something does not give you the right to have it.'

'What do you know? Have you never wanted something that much?'

'A true leader empowers the people he rules.'

'I can still lead Mankind into a new world.'

Seeing that Cesare was standing inches from the edge, Ezio raised his sword: 'May your name be blotted out. *Requiescat in Pace*.'

'You cannot kill me! No man can murder me!'

'Then I will leave you in the hands of Fate,' replied Ezio.

Dropping his sword, Ezio seized Cesare Borgia and, with a single deft movement, threw him off the battlements. He plunged onto the cobblestones a hundred feet below, but Ezio did not look down – the weight of his long fight against the Borgia was lifted from his heart.

66

It was Midsummer's Day again – Ezio's forty-eighth birthday. Ezio, Machiavelli and Leonardo were gathered in the newly refurbished Tiber Island headquarters, which was now a proud building for all to see.

'It's a very small birthday party,' commented Leonardo. 'Now, if you had let me design something for you, a real pageant …'

'Save that for two years' time,' smiled Ezio. 'We have invited you for another reason.'

'Which is?' asked Leonardo, full of curiosity.

Machiavelli, sporting a slightly crooked but fully healed shoulder, said, 'Leo, we want to extend an invitation to you.'

'Another one?'

'We want you to join us,' said Ezio solemnly. 'To become a fellow member of the Brotherhood of the Assassins.'

Leonardo smiled gravely. 'So my bombs were a success.' He was silent for a moment, then said, 'Gentlemen, I thank you, and you know that I respect your goals and will support them for as long as I live. I will never disclose the secrets of the Assassins to anyone,' he paused. 'But I tread a different path, and it is a solitary one. So forgive me.'

'Your support is almost as valuable as your becoming one of us. But can't we persuade you, old friend?'

'No, Ezio. Besides, I am leaving.'

'Leaving? Where are you going?'

'I shall return to Milan, and then I am going to Amboise.'

'To France?'

'They say it is a noble country, and it is there I choose to end my days.'

Ezio spread his hands. 'Then we must let you go, old friend.' He paused. 'This, then, is a parting of the ways.'

'How so?' asked Leonardo.

'I am returning to Florence,' replied Machiavelli. 'My work there is far from done.' He winked at Ezio. 'And I still have that book to write.'

'What will you call it?'

Machiavelli looked levelly at Ezio. ‘*The Prince*,’ he replied.

‘Send Claudia back to me.’

‘I will. She misses Rome, and you know she’ll support you as long as you continue your work as Mentor of the Brotherhood.’

Machiavelli glanced at the water clock.

‘It is time.’

The three men rose as one and embraced each other solemnly.

‘Goodbye.’

‘Goodbye.’

‘Goodbye.’

Author’s Note

Most of the translations from foreign languages in the text are my own, but for the quotations from Machiavelli’s *The Prince* and Virgil’s *Eclogues* (though I have adapted the latter very slightly). I am indebted to the late scholars George Bull (1929–2001) and E. V. Rieu (1887–1972) respectively.

Oliver Bowden, Paris, 2010

Glossary of Italian, French Spanish and Latin Terms

aiutateme! help me!
aiuto! help!
albergo hotel
altezza highness
altrettanto a lei also to you
andiamo let's go
arrivederci goodbye
Assassini Assassins
attenzione be careful
ayúdenme help me

bastardo, bastardi bastard/s
bellissima very beautiful
bene good, well
bestiarii gladiators
birbante rascal, rogue
bordello brothel
brutissimo most horrible, ugliest
buona questa good one
buona fortuna good luck
buona sera good evening
buongiorno, *fratellino* good morning, little brother

calma/calmatevi calm down
campione champion
capisci? do you understand?
capitano captain
caro padre dear father

cazzo prick/shit
che cosa fate qui? what are you doing here?
cher ami dear friend
che tipo brutto what a brute
che diavolo? what the devil?
comè usciamo di qui? how do we get out of here?
commendatore commander
campanile bell tower
compadre comrade
condottieri mercenaries
con piacere with pleasure
consummatum est it is finished
contessa Countess
corri! run!
cosa diavolo aspetti what the devil are you waiting for?
Curia the Roman law courts

déclarez-vous declare yourself
diavolo devil
dio mio my god
dio, ti prego, salvaci Lord, I beg you, save us
dottore doctor

Excellenza Excellence
el médico the doctor
Eminenze Eminence

figlio mio my son
figlio di puttana son of a whore
Firenze Florence
fortune fortune
forze armate armed forces
fottere fuck
fotutto Francese fucking Frenchman
furbacchione cunning old devil

gonfalon banner
graffito graffito
grazie, Madonna thanks to Our Lady
Halte-là stop there

idioti idiots
il Magnifico the Magnificent
insieme per la vittoria together for victory
intesi certainly/understood
ipocrita hypocrite

ladro thief
lieta di conoscervi pleased to meet you
luridi codardi filthy cowards

ma certo but of course
ma che meraviglia but what a marvel
Madonna my lady
madre mother
maestro master
mais franchement, je m'en doute but frankly, I doubt it
malattia venerea venereal illness
maldito bastardo damned bastard
maledette cursed
mausoleo mausoleum
medico doctor
merda shit
messer sir
mille grazie a thousand thank yous
miracolo miraculous
mis piernas my legs
molto bene very good
molte grazie thank you very much
momentino, Contessa one moment, Contessa
morbus gallicus French Disease

nessun problema no problem
Borgia nomenklatura influential Borgia
nos replegamos fall back

onoratissima most honoured one
ora, mi scusi, ma excuse me

padrone father
papa Pope
palazzo palace
perdone, Colonnello sorry, Colonel
perdonatemi, signore sorry, sir
perfetto perfect
pezzo di merda piece of shit
piano nobile the principal floor of a large house
piazze square(s)
pollo ripieno stuffed chicken
por favor please
pranzo lunch
presidente president
puttana whore

requiescat in Pace rest in Peace
rione district
rocca fortress

salve, messere hello, sir
sang maudit blood curse
scorpioni scorpions
Senatore Senator
sì yes
Signoria governing authority
signore sir
signora lady
si, zio mio yes, my uncle

sul serio? seriously?

tesora mia my treasure
tesora, tesoro sweetheart, treasure
torna qui, maledetto cavallo come here, damned horse

un momento one moment

va bene all right
vero true
vittoria agli Assassini victory to the Assassins
virtù virtue
Volpe Addormentata, La The Sleeping Fox

zio uncle

List of Characters

Mario Auditore: Ezio’s uncle and head of the Brotherhood of the Assassins
Ezio Auditore: Assassin
Maria Auditore: Ezio’s mother
Claudia Auditore: Ezio’s sister
Angelina Ceresa: friend of Claudia’s
Federico: Mario’s stable master
Annetta: Auditore family housekeeper
Paola: sister of Annetta and an Assassin
Ruggiero: master sergeant in Mario Auditore’s guards

Niccolò di Bernardo dei Machiavelli: Assassin, philosopher and writer, 1469–1527
Leonardo da Vinci: artist, scientist, sculptor, etc., 1452–1519
Antonio: Assassin
Fabio Orsini: Assassin
Bartolomeo d’Alviano: Italian Captain and Assassin (1455–1515)
Pantasilea Baglioni: Bartolomeo’s wife
Baldassare Castiglione: Associate Assassin
Pietro Bembo: Associate Assassin
Gilberto the Fox, la Volpe: Assassin and head of the Thieves’ Guild
Benito: member of the Thieves’ Guild
Trimalchio: member of the Thieves’ Guild
Claudio: thief and son of Trimalchio
Paganino: thief at the sacking of Monteriggioni

Madonna Solari: brothel keeper and Assassin accomplice
Agnella: prostitute from The Rosa in Fiori
Lucia: prostitute from The Rosa in Fiori

Saraghina: prostitute from The Rosa in Fiore.
Margherita deghli Campi: Roman aristocrat and Assassin sympathizer
Jacopo: sailor
Camilla: Naples prostitute
Filin: ship's captain
Captain Alberto: captain of the *Marea di Alba*
Acosta: Valencian doctor
Count of Lerin: Spanish count (1430–1508)
Caterina Sforza: The Countess of Forlì, daughter of Galeazzo (1463–1509)
Lorenzo de' Medici: 'Lorenzo the Magnificent', Italian statesman (1449–92)
Governor Piero Soderini: governor of Florence (1450–1522)
Amerigo Vespucci: friend and advisor to Soderini (1454–1512)

Rodrigo Borgia: Pope Alexander VI (1431–1503)
Cesare Borgia: son of Rodrigo (1476–1507)
Lucrezia Borgia: daughter of Rodrigo (1480–1519)
Vannozza Cattanei: mother of Cesare and Lucrezia Borgia (1442–1518)
Giulia Farnese: Rodrigo's mistress (1474–1524)
Princesse Charlotte d'Albret: wife of Cesare (1480–1514)
Juan Borgia: Archbishop of Monreale and Cesare's banker (1476–1497)
Général Duc Octavien de Valois: French general and Borgia ally
Micheletto da Corella: Cesare's right-hand man
Luca: Micheletto's diehard
Agostino Chigi: Pope Alexander's banker (1466–1520)
Luigi Torcelli: Cesare's banker's agent
Toffana: Lucrezia's servant
Gaspar Torella: Cesare's personal doctor
Johann Burchard: Pope Alexander VI's Master of Ceremonies
Juan: Guard at La Mota

Egidio Troche: Roman senator
Francesco Troche: Egidio's brother and Cesare's chamberlain

Michelangelo Buonarotti: artist, sculptor etc. (1475–1564)
Vinicio: Machiavelli's contact

Cardinal Giuliano della Rovere (1443–1513)
Cardinal Ascanio Sforza (1455–1505)
Agniolo and Innocento: assistants to Leonardo da Vinci
Pietro Benintendi: Roman actor
Dottore Brunelleschi: Roman doctor
The Cardinal of Rouen: Georges d'Amboise (1460–1510)
Pope Pius III: Cardinal Piccolomini (1439–1503)
Pope Julius II: Giuliano della Rovere, Cardinal of San Pietro in Vincoli (1443–1513)
Bruno: a spy

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ASSASSIN'S CREED®

The Secret Crusade

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Prologue

The majestic ship creaked and groaned; its sails rippled, fat with wind. Days from land, it split the ocean towards the great city in the west, carrying precious cargo: a man – a man the crew knew only as the Master.

He was among them now, alone on the forecastle deck, where he had lowered the cowl of his robes to let himself be lashed by seaspray, sipping at it with his face in the wind. Once a day he did this. He appeared from his cabin to pace the deck, chose a spot to gaze out at sea, then returned below. Sometimes he stood on the forecastle, sometimes on the quarter-deck. Always he stared out at the white-crested sea.

Every day the crew watched him. They worked, calling to one another on deck and in the rigging, each with a job to do, while all the time stealing glances at the solitary, pensive figure. And they wondered, What kind of man was he? What kind of man was in their midst?

Furtively they studied him now as he stepped away from the deck railings and pulled up his hood. He stood there a moment with his head bowed, his arms hanging loosely at his sides, and the crew watched him. Perhaps a few of them even paled as he strode along the deck past them and back to his cabin. And when the door shut behind him, each man found that he had been holding his breath.

Inside, the Assassin returned to his desk and sat, pouring a beaker of wine before reaching for a book and pulling it towards him. Then opening it. Beginning to read.

Part One

1

19 June 1257

Maffeo and I remain at Masyaf and will stay here for the time being. At least until one or two – how shall I put this? – *uncertainties* are resolved. In the meantime we remain at the behest of the Master, Altaïr Ibn-La'Ahad. Frustrating as it is to surrender dominion of our own paths in this way, especially to the leader of the Order, who in his old age wields ambiguity with the same ruthless precision he once wielded sword and blade, I at least benefit from being privy to his stories. Maffeo, however, has no such advantage and has grown restless. Understandably so. He tires of Masyaf. He dislikes traversing the steep slopes between the Assassin's fortress and the village below, and the mountainous terrain holds little appeal for him. He is a Polo, he says, and after six months here the wanderlust is like the call of a voluptuous woman to him, persuasive and tempting and not to be ignored. He longs to fill the sails with wind and set off for new lands, show Masyaf his back.

His impatience is a vexation I could live without, quite frankly. Altaïr is on the cusp of an announcement; I can feel it.

So, today I declared, 'Maffeo, I'm going to tell you a story.'

The manners of the man. Are we really kin? I begin to doubt it. For instead of greeting this news with the enthusiasm it so clearly warranted, I could have sworn I heard him sigh (or perhaps I should give him the benefit of the doubt: perhaps he was simply out of breath in the hot sun), before demanding of me, 'Before you do, Niccolò, would you mind telling me, what it is about?' in rather exasperated tones. I ask you.

Nevertheless: 'That is a very good question, brother,' I said, and gave the matter some thought as we made our way up the dreaded slope. Above us the citadel loomed darkly on the promontory, as if it had been hewn from the very limestone itself. I'd decided I wanted the perfect setting to tell my tale, and there was nowhere more apposite than the Masyaf fortress. An imposing castle of many turrets, surrounded by shimmering rivers, it presided over the bustling

village below, the settlement a high point within the Orontes Valley. An oasis of peace. A paradise.

'I would say that it's about *knowledge*,' I decided at last. '*Assasseen*, as you know, represents "guardian" in Arabic – the Assassins are the guardians of the secrets, and the secrets they guard are of knowledge, so, yes …' no doubt I sounded very pleased with myself '… it's about knowledge.'

'Then I'm afraid I have an appointment.'

'Oh?'

'Certainly I would welcome a diversion from my studies, Niccolò. However, an extension of them I don't desire.'

I grinned. 'Surely you want to hear the tales I've been told by the Master.'

'That all depends. Your pitch makes them sound less than invigorating. You know you say my tastes run to the bloodthirsty when it comes to your stories?'

'Yes.'

Maffeo gave a half-smile. 'Well, you're right, they do.'

'Then you shall have that, too. These are, after all, the tales of the great Altaïr Ibn-La'Ahad. This is his *life story*, brother. Believe me, there is no shortage of event, and much of it, you'll be happy to note, featuring bloodshed.'

By now we had made our way up the barbican to the outer part of the fortress. We passed beneath the arch and through the guard station, climbing again as we headed towards the inner castle. Ahead of us was the tower in which Altaïr had his quarters. For weeks I had been visiting him there, spending countless hours by him, rapt, as he sat with his hands clasped and his elbows on the rests of his tall chair, telling his stories, his old eyes barely visible beneath his cowl. And increasingly I had come to realize that I was being told these stories for a purpose. That for some reason yet unfathomable to me, I had been *chosen* to hear them.

When not telling his stories, Altaïr brooded among his books and memories, sometimes gazing for long hours from the window of his tower. He would be there now, I thought, and hooked a thumb under the band of my cap and shifted it back, shading my eyes to look up at the tower, seeing nothing but sun-bleached stone.

'We've an audience with him?' Maffeo interrupted my thoughts.

'No, not today,' I replied, instead pointing at a tower to our right. 'We're going up there …'

Maffeo frowned. The defensive tower was one of the highest in the citadel, and was reached by a series of vertiginous ladders, most of which looked in need of repair. But I was insistent, and I tucked my tunic into my belt then led Maffeo up to the first level, then to the next and finally to the top. From there we looked

across the countryside. Miles and miles of craggy terrain. Rivers like veins. Clusters of settlements. We looked over Masyaf: from the fortress to the buildings and markets of the sprawling village below, the wooden stockade of the outer curtain and stabling.

'How high are we?' asked Maffeo, looking a little green, no doubt conscious of being buffeted by the wind and that the ground now looked a long, long way away.

'Over two hundred and fifty feet,' I told him. 'High enough to put the Assassins out of range of enemy archers – but able to rain arrows and more down upon them.'

I showed him the openings surrounding us on all sides. 'From the machicolations here they could launch rocks or oil over their foe, using these …' Wooden platforms jutted out into space and we moved over to one now, holding on to upright supports either side and leaning out into the air to look down. Directly below us, the tower fell away to the cliff edge. Below that the shimmering river.

The blood draining from his face, Maffeo stepped back on to the safety of the tower floor. I laughed, doing the same (and secretly glad to, feeling a little giddy and sick myself, truth be told).

'And why is it you've brought us up here?' asked Maffeo.

'This is where my story begins,' I said. 'In more ways than one. For it was from here that the lookout first saw the invading force.'

'The invading force?'

'Yes. Salah Al'din's army. He came to lay siege to Masyaf, to defeat the Assassins. Eighty years ago, a bright day in August. A day very much like today …'

2

First, the lookout saw the birds.

An army on the move attracts scavengers. Of the winged variety, mainly, which swoop upon whatever scraps are left behind: food, waste and carcasses, both horse and human. Next he saw the dust. And then a vast, dark stain that appeared on the horizon, slowly beetling forward, engulfing everything in sight. An army inhabits, disrupts and destroys the landscape; it is a giant, hungry beast that consumes everything in its path and in most cases – as Salah Al'din was well aware – the mere sight of it was enough to move the enemy to surrender.

Not this time, though. Not when his enemies were the Assassins.

For the campaign the Saracen leader had raised a modest force of ten thousand infantry, cavalry and followers. With them he planned to crush the Assassins, who had already made two attempts on his life and would surely not fail a third time. Intending to take the fight to their door he had brought his army into the An–Nusayriyah mountains and to the Assassins' nine citadels there.

Messages had reached Masyaf that Salah Al'din's men had been plundering the countryside, but that none of the forts had fallen. That Salah Al'din was on his way to Masyaf, intent on conquering it and claiming the head of the Assassin leader, Al Mualim.

Salah Al'din was regarded as a temperate and fair-minded leader, but he was as angered by the Assassins as he was unnerved by them. According to reports, his uncle, Shihab Al'din, was advising him to offer a peace agreement. Have the Assassins with them, not against them, was Shihab's reasoning. But the vengeful Sultan would not be moved, and so it was that his army crawled towards Masyaf on a bright August day in 1176, and a lookout in the citadel's defensive tower saw the flocks of birds, the great clouds of dust and the black stain on the horizon, and he raised a horn to his lips and sounded the alarm.

Stockpiling supplies, the townspeople moved into the safety of the citadel, thronging the courtyards, faces etched with fear, but many of them setting up stalls to continue trading. The Assassins, meanwhile, began fortifying the castle, preparing to meet the army, watching the stain spread across the beautiful green landscape, the great beast feeding on the land, colonizing the horizon.

They heard the horns and drums and cymbals. And soon they could make out the figures as they materialized from the heat haze: thousands of them, they saw. The infantry: spearmen, javelinmen and archers, Armenians, Nubians and Arabs. They saw cavalry: Arabs, Turks and Mameluks, carrying sabre, mace, lance and longsword, some wearing chainmail, some leather armour. They saw the litters of the noblewomen, the holy men and the disorderly followers at the rear: the families, children and slaves. They watched as the invading warriors reached the outer curtain and set it ablaze, the stables too, the horns still blaring, cymbals crashing. Inside the citadel, the women of the village began weeping. They expected their homes to be next under the torch. But the buildings were left untouched, and instead the army came to a halt in the village, paying little regard to the castle – so it seemed.

They sent no envoy, no message; they simply made camp. Most of their tents were black, but in the middle of the encampment was a cluster of larger pavilions, the quarters of the great Sultan Salah Al'din and his closest generals. There, embroidered flags fluttered; the tips of the tent poles were gilded pomegranates, and the pavilion covers were of colourful silk.

In the citadel the Assassins mulled over their tactics. Would Salah Al'din assault the fortress or try to starve them out? As night fell they had their answer. Below them the army began work assembling its siege engines. Fires burned long into the night. The sound of sawing and hammering rose to the ears of those manning the citadel ramparts, and to the Master's tower, where Al Mualim called an assembly of his Master Assassins.

'Salah Al'din has been delivered to us,' said Faheem al-Sayf, a Master Assassin. 'This is an opportunity not to be missed.'

Al Mualim thought. He looked from the tower window, thinking of the colourful pavilion in which Salah Al'din now sat plotting his downfall – and that of the Assassins. He thought of the great Sultan's army and how it had laid waste to the countryside. How the Sultan was more than capable of raising an even larger force should his campaign fail.

Salah Al'din had matchless might, he reasoned. But the Assassins, they had guile.

'With Salah Al'din dead, the Saracen armies will crumble,' said Faheem.

But Al Mualim was shaking his head. 'I think not. Shihab will take his place.'

'He is half the leader Salah Al'din is.'

'Then he would be less effective in repelling the Christians,' countered Al Mualim, sharply. He tired sometimes of Faheem's hawklike ways. 'Do we wish to find ourselves at their mercy? Do we wish to find ourselves their unwilling

allies against the Sultan? We are the Assassins, Faheem. Our intent is our own. We belong to no one.'

A silence fell over the sweet-scented room.

'Salah Al'din is as wary of us as we are of him,' said Al Mualim, after reflection. 'We should see to it that he is made even more wary.'

The next morning the Saracens pushed a ram and siege tower up the main slope, and as Turkish horse-archers made passes, showering the citadel with arrows, they attacked the outer walls with their siege engines, under constant fire from Assassin archers and with rocks and oil pouring from the defensive towers. Villagers joined the battle, pelting the enemy with rocks from the ramparts, dousing the fires, while at the main gates, brave Assassins made sorties through the wicket doors, fighting back infantry trying to burn them down. The day ended with many dead on both sides, the Saracens retreating down the hill, lighting their fires for the night, repairing their siege engines, assembling more.

That night, there was a great commotion in the encampment, and in the morning the brightly coloured pavilion belong to the great Salah Al'din was taken down, and he left, taking a small bodyguard force with him.

Shortly after that, his uncle, Shihab Al'din, ascended the slope to address the Master of the Assassins.

3

‘His Majesty Salah Al’din has received your message, and thanks you most graciously for it,’ called the envoy. ‘He has business elsewhere and has left, with instructions for His Excellency Shihab Al’din to enter into talks.’

The envoy stood by Shihab’s stallion, cupping a hand to his mouth to call up to the Master and his generals, who were assembled in the defensive tower.

A small force had climbed the hill, two hundred men or so and a litter set down by Nubians, no more than a bodyguard for Shihab, who remained on horseback. On his face was a serene expression, as though he were not unduly concerned about the outcome of the talks. He wore wide white trousers, vest and red twisted sash. Inset into his large, blinding-white turban was a glittering jewel. That jewel would have an illustrious name, thought Al Mualim, gazing down upon him from the top of the tower. It would be called the Star of something or the Rose of something. The Saracens were so fond of naming their baubles.

‘Do begin,’ called Al Mualim, thinking, *Business elsewhere*, with a smile, his mind going back just a few hours to when an Assassin had come to his chambers, raising him from slumber and calling him to the throne room.

‘Umar, welcome,’ Al Mualim had said, wrapping his robes around himself, feeling the early-morning chill in his bones.

‘Master,’ Umar had replied, his voice low and his head bent.

‘You’ve come to tell me of your mission?’ Al Mualim said to him. He lit an oil lamp on a chain then found his chair, settling into it. Shadows flitted across the floor.

Umar nodded. There was blood on his sleeve, noticed Al Mualim.

‘Was our agent’s information correct?’

‘Yes, Master. I made my way into their encampment and, just as we were told, the gaudy pavilion was a decoy. Salah Al’din’s tent was nearby, a much less conspicuous accommodation.’

Al Mualim smiled. ‘Excellent, excellent. And how were you able to identify it?’

‘It was protected, just as our spy said it would be, with chalk and cinders scattered on the perimeter so my steps would be heard.’

‘But they were not?’

‘No, Master, and I was able to enter the Sultan’s tent and leave the feather as instructed.’

‘And the letter?’

‘Pinned by dagger to his pallet.’

‘And then?’

‘I crept from his tent …’

‘And?’

There was a pause.

‘The Sultan awoke and raised the alarm. I was only just able to escape with my life.’

Al Mualim indicated Umar’s blood-stained sleeve. ‘And that?’

‘I was forced to cut a throat in order to make good my escape, Master.’

‘A guard?’ asked Al Mualim, hopefully.

Umar shook his head sadly. ‘He wore the turban and vest of a nobleman.’

At which Al Mualim closed tired and sorrowful eyes. ‘There was no other option?’

‘I acted rashly, Master.’

‘But otherwise your mission was a success?’

‘Yes, Master.’

‘Then we shall see what transpires,’ he said.

What transpired was the exit of Salah Al’din and the visit from Shihab. And standing tall in his tower, Al Mualim had allowed himself to believe that the Assassins had prevailed. That his plan had worked. Their message had warned the Sultan that he should abandon his campaign against the Assassins, for the next dagger would not be pinned to his pallet but to his genitals. Simply by being able to leave it they had shown the monarch how vulnerable he really was; how his great force counted for nothing when a lone Assassin could outwit his decoys and guards and steal so easily into his tent as he slept.

And perhaps Salah Al’din was fonder of his genitals than he was of pursuing a long and costly war of attrition against an enemy whose interests only rarely came into conflict with his own. For he had gone.

‘His Majesty Salah Al’din accepts your offer of peace,’ said the envoy.

On the tower, Al Mualim shared an amused glance with Umar, who stood by his side. Further along was Faheem. His mouth was set.

‘Have we his assurance that our sect can operate without further hostilities, and no further interference in our activities?’ asked Al Mualim.

‘As long as interests allow, you have that assurance.’

‘Then I accept His Majesty’s offer,’ called Al Mualim, pleased. ‘You may remove your men from Masyaf. Perhaps you would be good enough to repair our stockade before you leave.’

At that Shihab looked sharply up at the tower, and even from the great height Al Mualim saw anger flash in his eyes. Shihab leaned from his stallion to speak to the envoy, who listened, nodding, then cupped his hand to his mouth to address those in the tower once more.

‘During the delivery of the message, one of Salah Al’din’s trusted generals was killed. His Majesty requires reparation. The head of the culprit.’

The smile slid from Al Mualim’s face. At his side, Umar tensed.

There was silence. Just the snorting of the horses. Birdsong. All waited to hear Al Mualim’s response.

‘You may tell the Sultan that I reject that demand.’

Shihab shrugged. He leaned over to speak to the envoy, who in turn addressed Al Mualim.

‘His Excellency wishes to inform you that unless you agree to the demand a force will remain here at Masyaf, and that our patience is greater than your store of supplies. Would you have the peace agreement count for nothing? Would you allow your villagers and your men to starve? All for the head of one Assassin? His Excellency dearly hopes not.’

‘I will go,’ hissed Umar to Al Mualim. ‘The mistake was mine. It is only right I should pay for it.’

Al Mualim ignored him. ‘I will not give up the life of one of my men,’ he called to the envoy.

‘Then His Excellency regrets your decision and asks that you bear witness to a matter now in need of resolution. We have discovered the existence of a spy in our camp, and he must be executed.’

Al Mualim caught his breath as the Saracens dragged the Assassin agent from the litter. After him came an executioner’s block that two Nubians placed on the ground in front of Shihab’s stallion.

The spy’s name was Ahmad. He had been beaten. His head – battered, bruised and blood-stained – lolled on his chest as he was manhandled to the block, dragged on his knees and draped over it, throat up. The executioner stepped forward: a Turk carrying a glinting scimitar that he grounded, placing both hands on the jewelled hilt. The two Nubians held Ahmad’s arms; he groaned a little, the sound rising to the stunned Assassins high in the defensive tower. ‘Let your man take his place and his life will be spared, the peace treaty honoured,’ called the envoy. ‘If not he dies, the siege begins and your people starve.’

Suddenly Shihab raised his head to shout, ‘Do you want that on your conscience, Umar Ibn-La’Ahad?’

As one the Assassins caught their breath. Ahmad had talked. Under torture, of course. But he had talked.

Al Mualim’s shoulders slumped.

Umar was beside himself. ‘Let me go,’ he urged Al Mualim. ‘Master, please.’

Below them the executioner planted his feet wide. Two-handed, he raised the sword above his head. Ahmad pulled feebly at the hands that pinned him. His throat was taut, offered for the blade. The promontory was silent but for his whimpering.

‘Your last chance, Assassin,’ called Shihab.

The blade shone.

‘*Master,*’ pleaded Umar, ‘let me go.’

Al Mualim nodded.

‘*Stop!*’ shouted Umar. He moved to a platform of the tower, calling down to Shihab. ‘I am Umar Ibn-La’Ahad. It is my life you should take.’

There was a ripple of excitement among the ranks of Saracens. Shihab smiled, nodded. He indicated to the executioner, who stood down, grounding his sword once more. ‘Very well,’ he said to Umar. ‘Come, take your place on the block.’

Umar turned to Al Mualim, who raised his head to look at him with red-rimmed eyes.

‘Master,’ said Umar, ‘I ask you one final favour. That you see to the care of Altaïr. Accept him as your novice.’

Al Mualim nodded. ‘Of course, Umar,’ he said. ‘Of course.’

There was a hush across the citadel as Umar climbed down the ladders of the tower, then took the slope through the barbican, under the arch and to the main gate. At the wicket gate a sentry came forward to open it, and he bent to go through.

A shout came from behind him: ‘*Father*.’ The sound of running feet.

He paused.

‘*Father*.’

He heard the distress in his son’s voice and squeezed his eyes shut against tears as he stepped out of the gate. The sentry closed it behind him.

They pulled Ahmad from the block and Umar tried to give him a reassuring look, but Ahmad could not meet his gaze as he was hauled away and dumped outside the wicket gate. It opened and he was dragged in. It closed again behind him. Arms took hold of Umar. He was pulled to the block, spread as Ahmad had been. He offered his throat and watched as the executioner towered above him. Beyond the executioner the sky.

‘*Father*,’ he heard from the citadel, as the gleaming blade came slicing down.

Two days later, under cover of darkness, Ahmad left the fortress. The following morning when his disappearance was discovered there were those who wondered how he could bear to leave his son alone – his mother having died of the fever two years previously – while others said the shame was too much for him, that that was why he had been forced to leave.

The truth was a different matter altogether.

4

20 June 1257

This morning I awoke with Maffeo shaking my shoulder – not especially gently, I should add. However, his insistence was prompted by an interest in my story. For that at least I should be grateful.

‘So?’ he said.

‘So what?’ If I sounded sleepy, well, that’s because I was.

‘So what happened to Ahmad?’

‘That I was to discover at a later date, brother.’

‘So tell me.’

As I pulled myself to a sitting position in my bed I gave the matter some thought. ‘I think it best that I tell you the stories just as they were told to me,’ I said at last. ‘Altaïr, ageing though he is, is quite the teller of tales. I believe I shall adhere to his narrative. And what I related to you yesterday formed the bulk of our very first meeting together. An episode that took place when he was just eleven years old.’

‘Traumatic for any child,’ reflected Maffeo. ‘What of his mother?

‘Died in childbirth.’

‘Altaïr an orphan at eleven?’

‘Indeed.’

‘What happened to him?’

‘Well, you know what happened. He sits up in his tower and –’

‘No, I mean what happened to him *next*?’

‘That also will have to wait, brother. The next time I saw Altaïr he had moved the focus of his narrative forward by fifteen years, to a day that found him creeping through the dark, dripping catacombs beneath Jerusalem …’

The year was 1191, more than three years since Salah Al’din and his Saracens had captured Jerusalem. In response the Christians had gnashed their teeth, stamped their feet, and taxed their people in order to fund the Third Crusade –

and once more men in chainmail had marched upon the Holy Land and laid siege to its cities.

England's King Richard, the one they called the Lionheart – as cruel as he was courageous – had recently recaptured Acre, but his greatest desire was to re-take Jerusalem, a holy site. And nowhere in Jerusalem was more sacred than the Temple Mount and the ruins of the Temple of Solomon – towards which Altaïr, Malik and Kadar crept.

They moved fast but stealthily, clinging to the sides of the tunnels, their soft boots barely disturbing the sand. Altaïr went ahead, Malik and Kadar a few paces behind, all with senses tuned to their surroundings, their pulses quickening as they came closer to the Mount. The catacombs were thousands of years old and looked every day of it; Altaïr could see sand and dust trickling from unsteady wooden supports, while underfoot the ground was soft, the sand wet with the water that dripped steadily from overhead – some kind of nearby watercourse. The air was thick with the smell of sulphur from the bitumen-soaked lanterns that lined the tunnel walls.

Altaïr was the first to hear the priest. Of course he was. He was the leader, the Master Assassin; his skills were greater, his senses sharper. He stopped. He touched his ear, then held up his hand, and all three became still, like wraiths in the passage. When he glanced back, they were awaiting his next command. Kadar's eyes gleamed with anticipation; Malik's were watchful and flinty.

All three held their breath. Around them the water dripped, and Altaïr listened intently to the priest's mumblings.

The false Christian piety of a Templar.

Now Altaïr placed his hands behind his back and flicked his wrist to engage his blade, feeling the familiar pull on the ring mechanism he wore on his little finger. He kept his blade in good order so that the noise it made when it released was almost inaudible – he timed it to the water droplets just to be sure.

Drip … drip … *snick*.

He brought his arms forward and the blade at his left hand glittered in the flickering torchlight, thirsty for blood.

Next Altaïr flattened himself to the tunnel wall and moved forward stealthily, rounding a slight bend until he could see the priest kneeling in the tunnel. He wore the robes of a Templar, which could only mean there were more ahead, probably within the ruins of the Temple. In search of their treasure, no doubt.

His heart quickened. It was just as he'd thought. That the city was under Salah Al'din's control wasn't going to stop the men of the red cross. They, too, had business at the Mount. What business? Altaïr intended to find out, but first …

First there was the priest to take care of.

Crouched low, he moved behind the kneeling man, who prayed on, unaware of death's proximity. Shifting his weight to his front foot and bending at the knee slightly, Altaïr raised the blade, his hand bent back, ready to strike.

'*Wait!*' hissed Malik from behind him. 'There must be another way … This one need not die.'

Altaïr ignored him. In one fluid movement he grasped the priest's shoulder with his right hand and with his left jammed the point of the blade into the back of his neck, slicing between the skull and the first vertebra of the backbone, severing his spine.

The priest had no time to scream: death was almost instantaneous. Almost. His body jerked and tautened but Altaïr held him firm, feeling his life ebb away as he held him with one finger on his carotid artery. Slowly, the body relaxed and Altaïr allowed it to crumple silently to the ground where it lay, a spreading pool of blood blotted by the sand.

It had been quick, soundless. But as Altaïr retracted the blade he saw the way Malik looked at him and the accusation in his eyes. It was all that he could do to suppress a sneer at Malik's weakness. Malik's brother, Kadar, on the other hand, was even now looking down at the priest's body with a mixture of wonderment and awe.

'An excellent kill,' he said breathlessly. 'Fortune favours your blade.'

'Not fortune,' boasted Altaïr, 'skill. Watch a while longer and you might learn something.'

As he said it he watched Malik carefully, seeing the Assassin's eyes flare angrily, jealous, no doubt, at the respect Kadar afforded Altaïr.

Sure enough, Malik turned on his brother. 'Indeed. He'll teach you how to disregard everything the Master taught us.'

Altaïr sneered once more. 'And how would you have done it?'

'I would not have drawn attention to us. I would not have taken the life of an innocent.'

Altaïr sighed. 'It matters not how we complete our task, only that it's done.'

'But that is not the way …' started Malik.

Altaïr fixed him with a stare. 'My way is better.'

For a moment or so the two men glared at one another. Even in the dank, cold and dripping tunnel, Altaïr could see in Malik's eyes the insolence, the resentment. He would need to be careful of that, he knew. It seemed that young Malik was an enemy in waiting.

But if he had designs on usurping Altaïr, Malik evidently decided that now was not the right moment to make his stand. 'I will scout ahead,' he said. 'Try not to dishonour us further.'

Any punishment for that particular insubordination would have to wait, decided Altaïr, as Malik left, heading up the tunnel in the direction of the Temple.

Kadar watched him go, then turned to Altaïr. ‘What is our mission?’ he asked. ‘My brother would say nothing to me, only that I should be honoured to have been invited.’

Altaïr regarded the enthusiastic young pup. ‘The Master believes the Templars have found something beneath the Temple Mount.’

‘Treasure?’ gushed Kadar.

‘I do not know. All that matters is the Master considers it important, else he would not have asked me to retrieve it.’

Kadar nodded and, at a wave of the hand from Altaïr, darted off to join his brother, leaving Altaïr alone in the tunnel. He looked down, pondering, at the body of the priest, a halo of blood on the sand around the head. Malik might have been right. There had been other ways of silencing the priest – he hadn’t had to die. But Altaïr had killed him because …

Because he could.

Because he was Altaïr Ibn-La’Ahad, born of an Assassin father. The most skilled of all those in the Order. A Master Assassin.

He set off, coming to a series of pits, mist floating in their depths, and leaped easily to the first crossbeam, lithely landing and crouching catlike, breathing steadily, enjoying his own power and athleticism.

He jumped to the next and to the next, then came to where Malik and Kadar stood waiting for him. But rather than acknowledge them he ran past, the sound of his feet like a whisper on the ground, barely disturbing the sand. Ahead of him was a tall ladder and he took it at a run, scampering up quickly and quietly, only slowing when he reached the very top, where he stopped, listening and sniffing the air.

Next, very slowly, he raised his head to see an elevated chamber, and there, as he’d expected, stood a guard with his back to him, wearing the outfit of a Templar: padded gambeson jacket, leggings, chainmail, sword at his hip. Altaïr, silent and still, studied him for a moment, taking note of his posture, the dip of his shoulders. Good. He was tired and distracted. Silencing him would be easy.

Slowly Altaïr pulled himself to the ground where he crouched for a moment, steadying his breathing and watching the Templar carefully, before moving up behind him, straightening and raising his hands: his left a claw; his right ready to reach and silence the guard.

Then he struck, snapping his wrist to engage the blade, which sprang forward in the same instant that he rammed it into the guard’s spine, reaching with his

right hand to smother the man's scream.

For a second they stood in a macabre embrace, Altaïr feeling the tickle of his victim's final muffled shout beneath his hand. Then the guard was crumpling and Altaïr lowered him gently to the ground, stooping to brush his eyelids closed. He had been punished severely for his failure as a lookout, Altaïr thought grimly, as he straightened from the corpse and moved off, joining Malik and Kadar as they crept beneath the arch that had been so poorly guarded.

Once through, they found themselves on an upper level of a vast chamber, and for a moment Altaïr stood taking it in, feeling suddenly overawed. This was the ruin of the fabled Solomon's Temple, said to have been built in 960 BC by King Solomon. If Altaïr was correct they now stood overlooking the Temple's greater house, its Holy Place. Early writings spoke of the Holy Place as having its walls lined with cedar, carved cherubim, palm trees and open flowers embossed with gold, but the Temple was now a shadow of its former self. Gone were the ornate wood, the cherubim and the gold finishing – to where, Altaïr could only guess, though he had little doubt the Templars had had a hand in it. Yet even stripped of its gilding it was still a place of reverence, and despite himself, Altaïr found himself filled with wonder to see it.

Behind him his two companions were even more awestruck.

'There – that must be the Ark,' said Malik, pointing across the chamber.

'The Ark of the Covenant,' gasped Kadar, seeing it too.

Altaïr had recovered, and glanced over to see the two men standing like a pair of foolish merchants dazzled at the sight of shiny baubles. *Ark of the Covenant?*

'Don't be silly,' he chided. 'There's no such thing. It's just a story.' Looking over, though, he was less sure. Certainly the box had all the properties of the fabled Ark. It was just as the prophets had always described: plated entirely with gold, a golden cover adorned with cherubim, and rings for inserting the poles that would be used to carry it. And there was something about it, Altaïr realized. It had an aura …

He tore his eyes away from it. More important matters needed his attention, namely the men who had just entered on the lower level, their boots crunching on what had once been fir-board flooring but was now bare stone. Templars, their leader already barking orders.

'I want it through the gate before sunrise,' he told them, referring no doubt to the Ark. 'The sooner we possess it, the sooner we can turn our attention to those jackals at Masyaf.'

He spoke with a French accent, and as he came into the light, they saw his distinctive cape – that of the Templar Grand Master.

'Robert de Sable,' said Altaïr. 'His life is mine.'

Malik rounded on him angrily. ‘*No*. We were asked to retrieve the treasure and deal with Robert *only* if necessary.’

Altaïr, tired of Malik’s constant defiance, turned on him. ‘He stands between us and it,’ he hissed angrily. ‘I’d say it’s necessary.’

‘Discretion, Altaïr,’ urged Malik.

‘You mean cowardice. That man is our greatest enemy – and here we have a chance to be rid of him.’

Still Malik argued: ‘You have already broken two tenets of our Creed. Now you would break the third. Do not compromise the Brotherhood.’

Finally Altaïr snapped: ‘I am your superior – in both title and ability. You should know better than to question me.’ And with that he turned, climbing quickly down the first ladder to a lower balcony, then to the floor where he strode confidently towards the group of knights.

They saw him coming and turned to face him, their hands on the hilts of their swords, their jaws set. Altaïr knew that they would be watching him, watching the Assassin as he glided across the floor towards them, his face hidden by his cowl, his robes and red sash flowing about him, the sword at his hip and the hilts of his short swords showing over his right shoulder. He knew the fear they would be feeling.

And he in turn watched them, mentally assessing each man: which of them was a right-handed swordsman, which fought with his left; who was built for speed and who would be strongest, paying particular attention to their leader.

Robert de Sable was the largest of them, the most powerful. His head was shaved, and etched into his face were years of experience, every one of which had contributed to his legend, that of a knight as famed for his skill with a sword as he was for his cruelty and ruthlessness – and this Altaïr knew above all: that of the men present he was by far the most dangerous; he had to be neutralized first.

He heard Malik and Kadar drop from the ladders and glanced behind to see them following his lead, Kadar swallowing, nervous, Malik’s eyes flashing his disapproval. The Templars tensed further at the sight of two more Assassins, the numbers more even now. Four of them surrounded de Sable, each man alert, the air thick with fear and suspense.

‘Hold, Templars,’ called Altaïr, when he was close enough to the five knights. He addressed de Sable, who stood with a thin smile upon his lips, his hands hanging at his sides. Not like his companions, ready for combat, but relaxed, as though the presence of the three Assassins was of little significance to him. Altaïr would make him pay for his arrogance. ‘You are not the only ones with business here,’ he added.

The two men weighed each other up. Altaïr moved his right hand, as though ready to grasp the hilt of the sword at his belt, wanting to keep de Sable's attention there when in fact death would snick smoothly from the left. *Yes*, he decided. Feint with the right, strike with the left. Dispatch Robert de Sable with the blade and his men would flee, leaving the Assassins to retrieve the treasure. All would talk of Altaïr's great victory over the Templar Grand Master. Malik – that coward – would be silenced, his brother wonderstruck afresh, and on their return to Masyaf the members of the Order would venerate Altaïr; Al Mualim would honour him personally and Altaïr's path to the position of Master would be assured.

Altaïr looked into the eyes of his opponent. Imperceptibly he flexed his left hand, testing the tension of the blade mechanism. He was ready.

'And what is it you want?' asked de Sable, with that same unconcerned smile.

'Blood,' said Altaïr simply, and struck.

With inhuman speed he leaped at de Sable, flicking the blade at the same moment, feinting with his right hand and striking, as fast and as deadly as a cobra, with his left.

But the Templar Grand Master was quicker and more cunning than he had anticipated. He caught the Assassin mid-attack, seemingly with ease, so that Altaïr was stopped in his tracks, unable to move and suddenly – horrifyingly – helpless.

And in that moment Altaïr realized he had made a grave mistake. A fatal mistake. In that moment he knew that it was not de Sable who was arrogant: it was himself. All of a sudden he no longer felt like Altaïr the Master Assassin. He felt like a weak and feeble child. Worse, a bragging child.

He struggled and found he could barely move, de Sable holding him easily. He felt a sharp stab of shame, thinking of Malik and Kadar seeing him brought low. De Sable's hand squeezed his throat, and he found himself gasping for breath as the Templar pushed his face forward at him. A vein in his forehead throbbed.

'You know not the things in which you meddle, Assassin. I spare you only that you may return to your Master and deliver a message: the Holy Land is lost to him and his. He should flee now, while he has the chance. Stay and all of you will die.'

Altaïr choked and spluttered, the edge of his vision beginning to fade, fighting unconsciousness as de Sable twisted him as easily as though handling a newborn and tossed him towards the back wall of the chamber. Altaïr crashed through the ancient stone and into the vestibule on the other side where he lay stunned for a

moment, hearing beams fall and the huge pillars of the chamber crash in. He looked up – and saw that his entrance to the Temple was blocked.

From the other side he heard shouts, de Sable crying, ‘Men. To arms. *Kill the Assassins!*’ He scrambled to his feet and dashed to the rubble, trying to find a way through. With shame and helplessness burning him, he heard the cries of Malik and Kadar, their screams as they died, and finally, his head low, he turned and began to make his way out of the Temple for the journey to Masyaf – there to bring the Master the news.

The news that he had failed. That he, the great Altaïr, had brought dishonour upon himself and upon the Order.

When he finally emerged from the bowels of the Temple Mount it was into bright sunshine and a Jerusalem that teemed with life. But Altaïr had never felt so alone.

5

Altaïr arrived at Masyaf after an exhausting five-day ride, during which he'd had more than enough time to reflect upon his failure. And thus it was with the heaviest of hearts that he arrived at the gates, was allowed in by the guard and made his way to the stables.

Dismounting and feeling his knotted muscles relax at last, he handed his horse to the stable boy then stopped by the well to take some water, sipping it at first, then gulping and, last, splashing it over himself, gratefully rubbing the dirt from his face. He still felt the grime of the journey upon his body, though. His robes hung heavy and filthy and he looked forward to washing in the shimmering waters of Masyaf, hidden away in an alcove of the cliff face. All he craved now was solitude.

As he made his way through the outskirts of the village, his gaze was drawn upwards – past the stable huts and bustling market to the winding paths that led to the ramparts of the Assassins' fortress. Here was where the Order trained and lived under the command of Al Mualim, whose quarters stood in the centre of the citadel's Byzantine towers. He was often to be seen staring from the window of his tower, lost in thought, and Altaïr pictured him there now, gazing down upon the village. The same village that bustled with life, bright with sunshine and loud with business. To which, ten days ago, Altaïr, leaving for Jerusalem with Malik and Kadar, had planned to return as a triumphant hero.

Never – not in his darkest imaginings – had he foreseen failure, and yet …

An Assassin hailed him as he made his way across the sun-dappled marketplace, and he pulled himself together, pushing back his shoulders and holding up his head, trying to summon from within the great Assassin who had left Masyaf, rather than the empty-handed fool who had returned.

It was Rauf, and Altaïr's heart sank further – if that were possible, which he sincerely doubted. Of all the people to greet him on his return it would have to be Rauf, who worshipped Altaïr like a god. It looked as though the younger man had been waiting from him, wiling away the time by a walled fountain. Indeed, he bounded up now with wide and eager eyes, oblivious to the nimbus of failure that Altaïr felt around himself.

‘Altaïr – you’ve returned.’ He was beaming, as pleased as a puppy to see him.

Altaïr nodded slowly. He watched as behind Rauf an elderly merchant refreshed himself at the fountainhead then greeted a younger woman, who arrived carrying a vase decorated with gazelles. She placed it on the low wall surrounding the waterhole and they began to talk, the woman excited, gesticulating. Altaïr envied them. He envied them both.

‘It is good to see you’re unharmed,’ continued Rauf. ‘I trust your mission was a success?’

Altaïr ignored the question, still watching those at the fountain. He was finding it difficult to meet Rauf’s eye. ‘Is the Master in his tower?’ he asked at last, tearing his gaze away.

‘Yes, yes.’ Rauf was squinting as though to divine somehow what was wrong with him. ‘Buried in his books, as always. No doubt he expects you.’

‘My thanks, brother.’

And with that he left Rauf and the chattering village folk at the fountainhead and began to make his way past the covered stalls and hay carts and benches, over the paving, until the dry and dusty ground sloped sharply upwards, the parched grass brittle in the sunshine, all paths leading to the castle.

Never had he felt so much in its shadow, and he found himself clenching his fists as he crossed the plateau and was greeted by the guards at the fortress approach, their hands on the hilts of their swords, their eyes watchful.

Now he reached the grand archway that led to the barbican, and once more his heart sank as he saw a figure he recognized within: Abbas.

Abbas stood beneath a torch that chased away what little dark there was within the arch. He was leaning against the rough dark stone, bare-headed, his arms folded and his sword at his hip. Altaïr stopped, and for a moment or so the two men regarded each other as villagers moved around them, oblivious of the old enmity blooming afresh between the two Assassins. Once they had called each other brother. But that time was long past.

Abbas smiled slowly, mockingly. ‘Ah. He returns at last.’ He looked pointedly over Altaïr’s shoulder. ‘Where are the others? Did you ride ahead, hoping to be the first one back? I know you are loath to share the glory.’

Altaïr did not answer.

‘Silence is just another form of assent,’ added Abbas, still trying to goad him – and doing it with all the cunning of an adolescent.

‘Have you nothing better to do?’ sighed Altaïr.

‘I bring word from the Master. He waits for you in the library,’ said Abbas. He ushered Altaïr past. ‘Best hurry. No doubt you’re eager to put your tongue to his boot.’

‘Another word,’ retorted Altaïr, ‘and I’ll put my blade to your throat.’

Abbas replied, ‘There will be plenty of time for that later, *brother*.’

Altaïr shouldered past him and continued to the courtyard and training square, and then to the doorway to Al Mualim’s tower. Guardsmen bowed their heads to him, affording him the respect a Master Assassin rightfully commanded, and he acknowledged them knowing that soon – as long as it took word to spread – their respect would be a memory.

But first he had to deliver the terrible news to Al Mualim, and he made his way up the steps of the tower towards the Master’s chamber. Here the room was warm, the air heavy with its customary sweet scent. Dust danced in shafts of light from the great window at the far end, where the Master stood, his hands clasped behind his back. His master. His mentor. A man he venerated above all others.

Whom he had failed.

In a corner the Master’s carrier pigeons cooed quietly in their cage and around him were his books and manuscripts, thousands of years of Assassin literature and learning, either on shelves or stacked in tottering, dusty piles. His sumptuous robes flowed about him, his long hair lay over his shoulders, and he was, as usual, contemplative.

‘Master,’ said Altaïr, breaking the thick silence. He lowered his head.

Wordless, Al Mualim turned and moved towards his desk, scrolls littered the floor beneath it. He regarded Altaïr with one sharp, flinty eye. His mouth, hidden within his grey-white beard, betrayed no emotion until at last he spoke, beckoning to his pupil. ‘Come forward. Tell me of your mission. I trust you have recovered the Templar treasure …’

Altaïr felt a trickle of perspiration make its way from his forehead and down his face. ‘There was some trouble, Master. Robert de Sable was not alone.’

Al Mualim waved away the notion. ‘When does our work ever go as expected? It’s our ability to adapt that makes us who we are.’

‘This time, it was not enough.’

Al Mualim took a moment to absorb Altaïr’s words. He moved from behind his desk, and when he next spoke, his voice was sharp. ‘What do you mean?’

Altaïr found himself having to force out the words. ‘I have failed you.’

‘The treasure?’

‘Lost to us.’

The atmosphere in the room changed. It seemed to tense and crackle as though brittle, and there was a pause before Al Mualim spoke again. ‘And Robert?’

‘Escaped.’

The word fell like a stone in the darkening space.

Now Al Mualim came closer to Altaïr. His one eye was bright with anger, his voice barely restrained, his fury filling the room. ‘I send you – my best man – to complete a mission more important than any that has come before and you return to me with nothing but apologies and excuses?’

‘I did –’

‘*Do not speak*.’ His voice was a whipcrack. ‘*Not another word*. This is not what I expected. We’ll need to mount another force so –’

‘I swear to you I’ll find him – I’ll go and …’ began Altaïr, who was already desperate to meet de Sable again. This time the outcome would be very different.

Now Al Mualim was looking about himself, as though only just recalling that when Altaïr had left Masyaf he had done so with two companions. ‘Where are Malik and Kadar?’ he demanded.

A second bead of sweat made its way from Altaïr’s temple as he replied, ‘Dead.’

‘*No,*’ came a voice from behind them, ‘not dead.’

Al Mualim and Altaïr turned to see a ghost.

6

Malik stood at the entrance to the Master's chamber – stood swaying, a wounded, exhausted, blood-soaked figure. His once-white robes were streaked with gore, most of it around his left arm, which looked badly wounded, dangling uselessly at his side and crusted with blackened, dried blood.

As he moved into the room his injured shoulder dipped, and he hobbled slightly. But if his body was damaged, then his spirit was surely not: his eyes burned brightly with anger and hatred – hatred that he turned on Altaïr with a glare so intense that it was all Altaïr could do not to shrink away.

'*I* still live, at least,' growled Malik, his bloodshot eyes brimming with fury as he stared at Altaïr. He took short, ragged breaths. His bared teeth were bloody.

'And your brother?' asked Al Mualim.

Malik shook his head. 'Gone.'

For a beat his eyes dropped to the stone floor. Then, with a sudden burst of angry energy, he raised his head, narrowed his eyes and raised a trembling finger to point at Altaïr. '*Because of you*,' he hissed.

'Robert threw me from the room.' Altaïr's excuses sounded feeble, even to his own ears – *especially* to his own ears. 'There was no way back. Nothing I could do –'

'Because you would not heed my warning,' shouted Malik, his voice hoarse. 'All of this could have been avoided. And my brother … my brother would still be alive. Your arrogance nearly cost us victory today.'

'Nearly?' said Al Mualim, carefully.

Calming, Malik nodded, the ghost of a smile on his lips – a smile directed at Altaïr, for even now he was beckoning another Assassin, who came forward bearing a box on a gilt tray.

'I have what your favourite failed to find,' said Malik. His voice was strained and he was weak, but nothing was going to sour his moment of triumph over Altaïr.

Altaïr felt his world falling away from him as the Assassin set down the tray on Al Mualim's desk. The box was covered with ancient runes and there was

something about it – an aura. Inside it, surely, was the treasure. It had to be. The treasure that Altaïr had been unable to recover.

Al Mualim's good eye was wide and gleaming. His lips were parted, his tongue darting from his mouth. He was entranced by the sight of the box and the thought of what was inside. Suddenly there came an uproar from outside. Screams. Running feet. The unmistakable ring of clashing steel.

'It seems I've returned with more than the treasure,' reflected Malik, as a messenger crashed into the chamber, forgetting all protocol as he breathlessly exclaimed, 'Master, we are under attack. Robert de Sable lays siege to the Masyaf village.'

Al Mualim was snatched from his reverie, in the mood to face de Sable. 'So he seeks a battle, does he? Very well. I'll not deny him. Go. Inform the others. The fortress must be prepared.'

Now he turned his attention to Altaïr, and his eyes blazed as he said, 'As for you, Altaïr, our discussion will have to wait. You must make for the village. Destroy these invaders. Drive them from our home.'

'It will be done,' said Altaïr, who could not help but be relieved at this sudden turn of events. Somehow the attack on the village was preferable to having to endure more of this humiliation. He had disgraced himself in Jerusalem. Now he had the chance to make amends.

He vaulted from the landing behind the Master's chamber to the smooth stone floor and dashed from the tower. As he ran across the training yard and through the main gates, he wondered whether being killed now might provide the escape he desired. Would that be a good death? A proud and noble death?

Enough to exonerate him?

He drew his sword. The sounds of battle were closer now. He could see Assassins and Templars fighting on the upland at the foot of the castle, while further down the hill villagers were scattering under the force of the assault, bodies already littering the slopes.

Then he was under attack. A Templar knight rushed him, snarling, and Altaïr twisted, letting his instincts take over, raising his sword to meet the Christian, who bore down upon him fast and hard, his broadsword slamming into Altaïr's blade with a clash of steel. But Altaïr was braced, feet planted wide apart, the line of his body perfect, and the Templar's attack barely moved him. He swept aside the other's sword, using the weight of the huge broadsword against the knight, whose arm flailed uselessly for a blink that Altaïr used to step forward and plunge his blade into the man's stomach.

The Templar had come at him confident of an easy kill. Easy, like the villagers he had already slaughtered. He'd been wrong. With the steel in his gut he

coughed blood and his eyes were wide with pain and surprise as Altaïr yanked the blade upward, bisecting his torso. He fell away, his intestines spilling to the dust.

Now Altaïr was fighting with pure venom, venting all of his frustration in his sword blows, as though he might pay for his crimes with the blood of his enemies. The next Templar traded blows, trying to resist as Altaïr pushed him back, his posture instantly changing from attack to defence, and then into desperate defence, so that even as he parried, he was whimpering in expectation of his own death.

Altaïr feinted, wheeled, and his blade flashed across the Christian's throat, which opened, sheeting blood down the front of his uniform, staining it as red as the cross on his chest. He sank to his knees then fell forward, just as another soldier rushed Altaïr, sunlight glinting from his raised sword. Altaïr stepped aside and buried his steel deep in the man's back so that, for a second, his entire body tautened, the blade protruding from his chestplate, his mouth open in a silent scream as Altaïr lowered him to the ground and retrieved his sword.

Two soldiers attacked together, thinking perhaps that their numbers would overwhelm Altaïr. They reckoned without his anger. He fought not with his usual cold indifference, but with fire in his belly. The fire of a warrior who cared nothing for his own safety. The most dangerous warrior of all.

Around him he saw more corpses of villagers, put to the sword by the attacking Templars, and his anger blossomed, his sword blows becoming even more vicious. Two more soldiers fell beneath his blade and he left them twitching in the dirt. But now more and more knights were appearing, villagers and Assassins alike were rushing up the slope, and Altaïr saw Abbas commanding them to return to the castle.

'Press the attack on the heathen fortress,' cried a knight in response. He was running up the hill towards Altaïr, his sword swinging as he swiped at a fleeing woman. 'Let us bring the fight to the Assassin –'

Altaïr slammed his sword into the throat of the Christian, whose last word was a gurgle.

But behind the escaping villagers and Assassins came more Templars, and Altaïr hesitated on the slope, wondering if now was the moment to take his final stand – die defending his people and escape his prison of shame.

But no. There was no honour in a wasteful death, he knew, and he joined those retreating to the fortress, arriving as the gates were closing. Then he turned to look out on the scene of carnage outside, the beauty of Masyaf sullied by the bloodied bodies of the villagers, the soldiers and the Assassins.

He looked down at himself. His robes were splashed with Templar blood but he himself was unharmed.

‘*Altaïr!*’ The cry pierced his thoughts. Rauf again. ‘Come.’

He felt weary all of a sudden. ‘Where are we going?’

‘We have a surprise for our guests. Just do as I do. It should become clear soon enough …’ Rauf was pointing high above them to the ramparts of the fortress. Altaïr sheathed his sword and followed him up a series of ladders to the tower summit where the Assassin leaders were gathered, Al Mualim among them. Crossing the floor, he looked to the Master, who ignored him, his mouth set. Then Rauf was indicating one of three wooden platforms jutting out into the air, bidding him to take his place on it. He did so, taking a deep breath before he walked carefully to the edge.

And now he stood at the top of Masyaf, able to look down upon the valley. He felt air rushing around him; his robe fluttered in the wind and he saw flocks of birds gliding and swooping on warm pockets of air. He felt giddy with the height yet breathless with the spectacle: the rolling hills of the countryside, cast in lush green; the shimmering water of the river; bodies, now specks on the slopes.

And Templars.

The invading army had gathered on the upland in front of a watchtower, close to the gates of the fortress. At their head was Robert de Sable, who now stepped forward, looking up to the ramparts where the Assassins stood, and addressed Al Mualim.

‘*Heretic!*’ he roared. ‘Return what you have stolen from me.’

The treasure. Altaïr’s mind drifted momentarily to the box on Al Mualim’s desk. It had seemed to glow …

‘You’ve no claim to it, Robert,’ replied the Master, his voice echoing across the valley. ‘Take yourself from here before I’m forced to thin your ranks further.’

‘You play a dangerous game,’ replied de Sable.

‘I assure you this is no game.’

‘So be it,’ came the reply.

Something about the tone of his voice – Altaïr didn’t like it. Sure enough, de Sable turned to one of his men. ‘Bring forward the hostage.’

From among their ranks they dragged the Assassin. He was bound and gagged and he writhed against his bonds as he was hauled roughly to the front of the assembly. His muffled cries rose to where Altaïr stood on the platform.

Then, without ceremony, de Sable nodded to a soldier who stood nearby. He yanked the Assassin’s hair so that his throat was exposed and swept his blade across it, opening it, then let the body fall to the grass.

The Assassins, watching, caught their breath.

De Sable moved and stood near the body, resting one foot on the dying man's back with his arms folded like a triumphant gladiator. There was murmur of disgust among the Assassins as he called up to Al Mualim, 'Your village lies in ruins and your stores are hardly endless. How long before your fortress crumbles from within? How disciplined will your men remain when the wells run dry and their food is gone?' He could hardly keep the gloating note from his voice.

But in reply Al Mualim was calm: 'My men do not fear death, Robert. They welcome it – and the rewards it brings.'

'Good,' called de Sable. 'Then they shall have it all around.'

He was right, of course. The Templars could lay siege to Masyaf and prevent the Assassins receiving supplies. How long could they last before they were so weakened that de Sable could safely attack? Two weeks? A month? Altaïr could only hope that whatever plan Al Mualim had in mind was enough to break the deadlock.

As if reading his thoughts, Rauf whispered to him, from a platform to his left, 'Follow me. And do so without hesitation.'

A third Assassin stood further across. They were hidden from de Sable and his men. Looking down, Altaïr saw strategically placed mounds of hay, enough to break a fall. He was beginning to understand what Rauf had in mind. They were to jump, undetected by the Templars. But why?

His robe flapped at his knees. The sound was comforting, like waves or rain. He looked down and steadied his breathing. He focused. He went to a place within himself.

He heard Al Mualim and de Sable trading words but he was no longer listening, thinking only of the jump, composing himself for it. He closed his eyes. He felt a great calm, a peace within.

'Now,' said Rauf, who leaped, followed by the other Assassin. Next, Altaïr.

He jumped.

Time collapsed as he fell, his arms outstretched. With his body relaxed and arcing gracefully through the air, he knew that he had achieved a kind of perfection – it was as though he was detached from himself. And then he landed perfectly, a haystack breaking his fall. Rauf too. Not so the third Assassin, whose leg snapped on impact. Immediately the man screamed and Rauf moved over to quieten him, not wanting the Templars to hear: for the subterfuge to work, the knights needed to believe that the three men had leaped to their death.

Rauf turned to Altaïr. 'I'll stay behind and attend to him. You'll have to go ahead without us. The ropes there will bring you to the trap. Release it – rain death upon our enemies.'

Of course. Altaïr understood now. Briefly he wondered how the Assassins had been able to set a trap without him knowing. How many other facets of the Brotherhood remained a secret to him? Nimbly he made his way along the ropes across the chasm, doubling back across the gorge and to the cliff face behind the watchtower. He climbed on instinct. Fast and lithe, feeling the muscles in his arms sing as he scaled the sheer walls higher and higher until he reached the top of the watchtower. There beneath the boards of the upper level he found the trap rigged and ready to be sprung: heavy greased logs, stockpiled and stacked on a tilted platform.

Silently he moved to the edge, looking over to see the assembled ranks of the Templar knights, scores of them with their backs to him. Here also were the ropes holding the trap in place. He drew his sword, and for the first time in days, he smiled.

7

Later the Assassins were assembled in the courtyard, still savouring their triumph.

The logs had tumbled from the watchtower and into the knights below, most of whom were crushed by the first wave, while others were caught in a second load stacked behind the first. Just moments before, they had been assured of victory. Then their bodies had been pummelled, limbs snapping, the entire force in disarray, Robert de Sable already ordering his men back as the Assassins' archers pressed home their advantage and rained arrows down upon them.

Now, though, Al Mualim commanded a hush over the gathered Assassins, indicating to Altaïr to join him on the rostrum by the entrance to his tower. His eyes were hard, and as Altaïr took his place, Al Mualim beckoned two guards to take their place at either side of him.

Silence replaced the congratulations. Altaïr, with his back to the Assassins, felt all eyes on him. By now they would know what had happened in Jerusalem; Malik and Abbas would have seen to that. Altaïr's efforts in battle, then springing the trap – they would count for nothing now. All he could hope was that Al Mualim would show mercy.

'You did well to drive Robert from here,' said the Master, and it was with a measure of pride that he said it. Enough for Altaïr to hope that he might be forgiven; that his actions since Jerusalem had redeemed him. 'His force is broken,' continued Al Mualim. 'It shall be a long while before he troubles us again. Tell me, do you know why it is you were successful?'

Altaïr said nothing, heart hammering.

'You were successful because you listened,' pressed Al Mualim. 'Had you listened in Solomon's Temple, Altaïr, all of this would have been avoided.'

His arm described a circle, meant to take in the courtyard and all that lay beyond, where even now the corpses of Assassins, of Templars and villagers were being cleared away.

'I did as I was asked,' said Altaïr, trying to choose his words carefully, but failing.

‘*No!*’ snapped the Master. His eyes blazed. ‘You did as you pleased. Malik has told me of the arrogance you displayed. Your disregard for our ways.’

The two guards on either side of Altaïr stepped forward and took his arms. His muscles tensed. He braced himself against them but did not struggle.

‘What are you doing?’ he said warily.

The colour rose in Al Mualim’s cheeks. ‘There are rules. We are nothing if we do not abide by the Assassin’s Creed. Three simple tenets, which you seem to forget. I will remind you. First and foremost: stay your blade …’

It was to be a lecture. Altaïr relaxed, unable to keep the note of resignation from his voice as he finished Al Mualim’s sentence. ‘… from the flesh of an innocent. I know.’

The crack of Al Mualim’s palm across Altaïr’s face echoed from the stone of the courtyard. Altaïr felt his cheek burn.

‘And stay your tongue unless I give you leave to use it,’ roared Al Mualim. ‘If you are so familiar with this tenet, why did you kill the old man inside the Temple? He was innocent. He did not need to die.’

Altaïr said nothing. What could he say? I acted rashly? Killing the old man was an act of arrogance?

‘Your insolence knows no bounds,’ bellowed Al Mualim. ‘Make humble your heart, child, or I swear I’ll tear it from you with my own hands.’

He paused, his shoulders rising and falling as he took hold of his anger. ‘The second tenet is that which gives us strength,’ he continued. ‘Hide in plain sight. Let the people mask you so that you become one with the crowd. Do you remember? Because, as I hear it, you chose to expose yourself, drawing attention *before* you’d struck.’

Still Altaïr said nothing. He felt the shame squat in his gut.

‘The third and final tenet,’ added Al Mualim, ‘the worst of all your betrayals: never compromise the Brotherhood. Its meaning should be obvious. Your actions must never bring harm upon us – direct or indirect. Yet your selfish act beneath Jerusalem placed us all in danger. Worse still, you brought the enemy to our home. Every man we’ve lost today was lost because of you.’

Altaïr had been unable to look at the Master. His head had remained on one side, still smarting from the slap. But as he heard Al Mualim draw his dagger he looked at last.

‘I am sorry. Truly, I am,’ said Al Mualim. ‘But I cannot abide a traitor.’

No. Not that. Not a traitor’s death.

His eyes widened as they went to the blade in the Master’s hand – the hand that had guided him since him childhood. ‘I am not a traitor,’ he managed.

‘Your actions indicate otherwise. And so you leave me no choice.’ Al Mualim drew back his dagger. ‘Peace be upon you, Altaïr,’ he said, and plunged it into Altaïr’s stomach.

8

And it was. For a few precious moments when he was dead, Altaïr was at peace.

Then … then he was coming round, gradually recovering a sense of himself and of where he was.

He was on his feet. How could he be on his feet? Was this death, the afterlife? Was he in Paradise? If so, it looked very much like Al Mualim's quarters. Not only that, but Al Mualim was present. Standing over him, in fact, watching him with an unreadable gaze.

'I'm alive?' Altaïr's hands went to where the knife had been driven into his stomach. He expected to find a ragged hole and feel wet blood but there was nothing. No wound, no blood. Even though he'd seen it. Felt it. He'd felt the pain …

Hadn't he?

'But I saw you stab me,' he managed, 'felt death's embrace.'

Al Mualim was inscrutable in return. 'You saw what I wanted you to see. And then you slept the sleep of the dead. The womb. That you might awake and be reborn.'

Altaïr shook a fog away from his mind. 'To what end?'

'Do you remember, Altaïr, what it is the Assassins fight for?'

Still trying to readjust, he replied, 'Peace, in all things.'

'Yes. In all things. It is not enough to end the violence one man commits upon another. It refers to peace within as well. You cannot have one without the other.'

'So it is said.'

Al Mualim shook his head, cheeks colouring again as his voice rose. 'So it is. But you, my son, have not found inner peace. It manifests in ugly ways. You are arrogant and over-confident. You lack self-control and wisdom.'

'Then what is to become of me?'

'I should kill you for the pain you've brought upon us. Malik thinks it's only fair – your life in exchange for that of his brother.'

Al Mualim paused to allow Altaïr to understand the full significance of the moment. 'But this would be a waste of my time and your talents.'

Altaïr allowed himself to relax a little more. He was to be spared. He could redeem himself.

‘You have been stripped of your possessions,’ continued Al Mualim. ‘Your rank as well. You are a novice – a child – once more. As you were on the day you first joined the Order. I am offering you a chance of redemption. You’ll earn your way back into the Brotherhood.’

Of course. ‘I assume that you have something planned.’

‘First you must prove to me you remember *how* to be an Assassin. A true Assassin,’ said Al Mualim.

‘So you would have me take a life?’ asked Altaïr, knowing his forfeit would be far more rigorous.

‘No. Not yet, at least. For now you are to become a student once again. ‘

‘There is no need for this. I am a Master Assassin.’

‘You *were* a Master Assassin. Others tracked your targets for you. But no more. From today on, you will track them yourself.’

‘If that is what you wish.’

‘It is.’

‘Then tell me what it is that I must do.’

‘I hold here a list. Nine names adorn it. Nine men who need to die. They are plague-bringers. War-makers. Their power and influence corrupt the land – and ensure the Crusades continue. You will find them. Kill them. In doing so you’ll sow the seeds of peace, both for the region and for yourself. In this way, you may be redeemed.’

Altaïr took a long, deep breath. This he could do. This he wanted – *needed* – to do.

‘Nine lives in exchange for mine,’ he said carefully.

Al Mualim smiled. ‘A most generous offer, I think. Have you any questions?’

‘Where shall I begin?’

‘Ride for Damascus. Seek out the black-market merchant named Tamir. Let him be the first to fall.’

Al Mualim moved to his cage of carrier pigeons, took one and cupped it gently in his palm. ‘Be sure to visit the city’s Assassin Bureau when you arrive. I’ll dispatch a bird to inform the *rafiq* of your arrival. Speak with him. You’ll find he has much to offer.’

He opened his hand and the bird disappeared through the window, as though snuffed out.

‘If you believe it best,’ said Altaïr.

‘I do. Besides, you cannot begin your mission without his consent.’

Altair bridled. ‘What nonsense is this? I don’t need his permission. It’s a waste of time.’

‘It’s the price you pay for the mistakes you’ve made,’ snapped the Master. ‘You answer not only to me but to all of the Brotherhood now.’

‘So be it,’ conceded Altaïr, after a pause long enough to communicate his displeasure.

‘Go, then,’ said Al Mualim. ‘Prove that you are not yet lost to us.’

He paused, then reached for something from beneath his desk that he pushed across to Altaïr. ‘Take it,’ he said.

Gladly, Altaïr reached for his blade, buckling the brace to his wrist and looping the release over his little finger. He tested the mechanism, feeling like an Assassin once more.

9

Altaïr made his way through the palms and past the stables and traders outside the city walls until he came to the huge, imposing gates of Damascus. He knew the city well. The biggest and holiest in Syria, it had been home to two of his targets the previous year. He cast his gaze up to the surrounding wall and its ramparts. He could hear the life inside. It was as though the stone hummed with it.

First, to make his way in. The success of his mission depended on his ability to move anonymously though the sprawling streets. A challenge from the guards wouldn't be the best start. He dismounted and tethered his horse, studying the gates, where Saracen guards stood watch. He would have to try another way, and that was more easily considered than achieved, for Damascus was famously secure, its walls – he gazed up once more, feeling small – were too high and too sheer to be scaled from the outside.

Then he saw a group of scholars, and smiled. Salah Al'din had encouraged the learned men to visit Damascus for study – there were many *madrasah*s throughout the city – and as such they enjoyed special privileges and were allowed to wander unhindered. He moved over and joined them, assuming his most pious stance, and with them drifted easily past the guards, leaving the desert behind as he entered the great city.

Inside, he kept his head down, moving fast but carefully through the streets, reaching a minaret. He cast a swift look around before leaping to a sill, pulling himself up, finding more handholds in the hot stone and climbing higher and higher. He found his old skills coming back to him, though he wasn't moving as quickly or as surely as he once had. He felt them returning. No – *reawakening*. And with them the old feeling of exhilaration.

Then he was at the very tip of the minaret and there he squatted. A bird of prey high above the city, looking around himself, seeing the domed mosques and pointed minarets that interrupted an uneven sea of rooftops. He saw marketplaces, courtyards and shrines, as well as the tower that marked the position of the Assassins' Bureau.

Again, a sense of exaltation passed through him. He'd forgotten how beautiful cities looked from such a height. He'd forgotten how he felt, looking down upon them from their highest points. In those moments he felt released.

Al Mualim had been right. For years now, Altaïr's targets had been located for him. He would be told where to go and when, his job to kill, nothing more, nothing less. He hadn't realized it but he had missed the thrill of what it really meant to be an Assassin, which wasn't bloodshed and death: it was what was to be found inside.

He crabbed forward a little, looking down into the narrow streets. The people were being called to prayer and the crowds were thinning. He scanned the canopies and rooftops, looking for a soft landing, then saw a hay cart. Fixing his eyes on it, taking deep breaths, he stood, feeling the breeze, hearing bells. Then he took a step forward, tumbling gracefully and hitting his target. Not as soft as he had hoped, perhaps, but safer than risking a landing on a fraying canopy, which was liable to tear and deposit him in a heap on the stall below. He listened, waiting until the street was quieter, then scrambled from the cart and began to make his way to the Bureau.

He reached it from the roof, dropping into a shaded vestibule in which tinkled a fountain, plants deadening the sounds from outside. It was if he had stepped into another world. He gathered himself and went inside.

The leader lounged behind a counter. He stood as the Assassin entered. 'Altaïr. It is good to see you. And in one piece.'

'You as well, friend.' Altaïr eyed the man, not much liking what he saw. For one thing, he had an insolent, ironic manner. There was no doubt, also, that he had been informed of Altaïr's recent … *difficulties* – and, by the look of him, planned to make the most of the temporary power the situation afforded him.

Sure enough, when he next spoke it was with a barely disguised smirk. 'I am sorry for your troubles.'

'Think nothing of it.'

The leader assumed a look of counterfeit concern. 'A few of your brothers were here earlier …'

So. *That* was how he was so well informed, thought Altaïr.

'If you'd heard the things they said,' the leader continued airily, 'I'm certain you'd have slain them where they stood.'

'It's quite all right,' said Altaïr.

The leader grinned. 'Yes, you've never been one for the Creed, have you?'

'Is that all?' Altaïr found himself longing to slap off the insolent dog's smile. Either that or use his blade to lengthen it …

‘I’m sorry,’ said the leader, reddening, ‘sometimes I forget myself. What business brings you to Damascus?’ He straightened a little, remembering his place at last.

‘A man named Tamir,’ said Altaïr. ‘Al Mualim takes issue with the work he does and I am meant to end it. Tell me where to find him.’

‘You will have to track him.’

Altaïr bridled. ‘But that sort of work is best left for …’ He stopped himself, remembering Al Mualim’s orders. He was to be a novice again. Conduct his own investigations. Find the target. Perform the kill. He nodded, accepting his task.

The leader continued: ‘Search the city. Determine what Tamir’s planning and where he works. Preparation makes the victor.’

‘All right, but what *can* you tell me of him?’ asked Altaïr.

‘He makes his living as a black-market merchant, so the souk district should be your destination.’

‘I assume you want me to return to you when this is done.’

‘Come back to me. I’ll give you Al Mualim’s marker. And you’ll give us Tamir’s life.’

‘As you wish.’

Glad to be away from the stultifying Bureau, Altaïr made his way to the rooftops. Once again, he inhaled the city as he stopped to gaze into a narrow street below. A light breeze rippled canopies. Women milled around a stall selling polished oil lamps, chattering wildly, and not far away two men stood arguing. Over what, Altaïr couldn’t hear.

He turned his attention to the building opposite, then away over the rooftops. From there he could see the Pasha Mosque and the site of the Formal Gardens in the south but what he needed to locate was the …

He saw it, the huge Souk al-Silaah – where, according to the leader, he could begin to learn about Tamir. The leader knew more than he was revealing, of course, but was under strict instructions not to tell Altaïr. He understood that: the ‘novice’ had to learn the hard way.

He took two steps back, shook the tension from his arms, drew a deep breath, then jumped.

Safely across, he crouched for a moment, listening to the chatter from the lane below. He watched a group of guards as they passed, leading an ass with a cart that sagged beneath the weight of many stacked casks. ‘Make way,’ the guards were saying, shoving citizens from their path. ‘Make way for we come with supplies bound for the Vizier’s Palace. His Excellency Abu’l Nuqoud is to throw another of his parties.’ Those citizens who were shoved aside hid scowls of displeasure.

Altaïr watched the soldiers pass below him. He had heard the name, Abu'l Nuqoud: the one they called the Merchant King of Damascus. The casks. Altaïr might have been mistaken, but they looked as though they contained wine.

No matter. Altaïr's business lay elsewhere. He straightened and set off at a jog, barely pausing for the leap to the next building and then the next, feeling a fresh surge of power and strength with each jump. Back to doing what he knew.

Seen from above, the souk was like ragged hole that had been punched into the city's rooftops so it was easy to find. The biggest trading centre in Damascus, it lay in the centre of the city's Poor District in the north-east and was bordered on all sides by buildings of mud and timber – Damascus turned into a swamp when it rained – and was a patchwork of carts, stands and merchants' tables. Sweet scents rose to Altaïr on his perch high above: perfumes and oils, spices and pastries. Everywhere customers, merchants and traders were chattering or moving quickly through the crowds. The city's people either stood and talked or hurried from one place to the next. There was no in-between, it seemed – not here, anyway. He watched them for a while, then clambered from the rooftop and, blending into the crowds, listened.

Listening for one word.

'*Tamir.*'

The three merchants were huddled in the shade, talking quietly but with all kinds of wild hand movements. It was they who had said the name, and Altaïr sidled over towards them, turning his back and hearing Al Mualim's tutelage in his head as he did so: 'Never make eye contact, always look occupied, stay relaxed.'

'He's called another meeting,' heard Altaïr, unable to place which of the men was speaking. Who was the 'he' they mentioned? Tamir, presumably. Altaïr listened, making a mental note of the meeting place.

'What is it this time? Another warning? Another execution?'

'No. He has work for us.'

'Which means we won't be paid.'

'He's abandoned the ways of the merchant guild. Does as he pleases now …'

They began discussing a large deal – the biggest ever, said one, in hushed tones – when suddenly they stopped. Not far away an orator with a close-trimmed black beard had taken his place at his stand, and was now staring at the merchants with dark, hooded eyes. Threatening eyes.

Altaïr stole a glance from beneath his cowl. The three men had gone pale. One scuffed at the dirt with his sandal; the other two drifted away, as though suddenly remembering an important task at hand. Their meeting was at an end.

The orator. One of Tamir's men, perhaps. Evidently the black-marketeer ruled the souk with a firm hand. Altaïr drifted over as the man began to speak, drumming up an audience.

'None knows Tamir better than I,' he announced loudly. 'Come close. Hear the tale I have to tell. Of a merchant prince without peer …'

Just the tale Altaïr wanted to hear. He drifted closer, able to play the part of an interested observer. The market swirled around him.

'It was just before Hattin,' continued the speaker. 'The Saracens were low on food, and in desperate need of resupply. But there was no relief in sight. Tamir drove a caravan in those days between Damascus and Jerusalem. But recent business had been poor. It seemed there were none in Jerusalem who wanted what he had: fruits and vegetables from nearby farms. And so Tamir left, riding north and wondering what would become of his supplies. Soon they would surely spoil. That should have been the end of this tale and the poor man's life … But Fate intended otherwise.

'As Tamir drove his caravan north, he came across the Saracen leader and his starving men. Most fortunate for them both – each having something the other wanted.

'So Tamir gave the man his food. And when the battle was finished, the Saracen leader saw to it that the merchant was repaid a thousand times.

'Some say, were it not for Tamir, Salah Al'din's men would have turned on him. It could be that we won the battle because of that man …'

He finished his speech and let his audience drift away. On his face was a thin smile as he stepped away from the stand and moved into the market. Off, perhaps, to another stand to make the same speech exalting Tamir. Altaïr followed, keeping a safe distance, once again hearing his tutor's words in his head: 'Put obstacles between yourself and your quarry. Never be found by a backwards glance.'

These skills: Altaïr enjoyed the feeling they brought as they returned to him. He liked being able to shut out the clamour of the day and focus on his quarry. Then, abruptly, he stopped. Ahead of him the orator had bumped into a woman carrying a vase, which had smashed. She began remonstrating with him, her hand out demanding payment, but he curled a cruel lip and drew back his hand to strike her. Altaïr found himself tensing, but she cowered away and he sneered, lowering his hand, walking on, kicking bits of broken pot as he went. Altaïr moved on, past the woman, who now crouched in the sand, weeping and cursing and reaching for the shards of her vase.

Now the orator turned off the street and Altaïr followed. They were in a narrow, almost empty lane, dark mud walls pressing in on them. A shortcut,

presumably, to the next stand. Altaïr glanced behind him, then took a few quick steps forward, grasped the speaker by the shoulder, spun him around and jammed the tips of his fingers beneath his ribcage.

Instantly the orator was doubled up, stumbling back and gasping for breath, his mouth working like that of a grounded fish. Altaïr shot a look to make sure there were no witnesses, then stepped forward, pivoted on one foot and kicked the orator in the throat.

He fell back messily, his *thawb* twisted around his legs. Now his hands went to where Altaïr had kicked him and he rolled in the dust. Smiling, Altaïr moved forward. Easy, he thought. It had been too …

The orator moved with the speed of a cobra. He shot up and kicked out, catching Altaïr square in the chest. Surprised, the Assassin staggered back as the other came forward, mouth set and fists swinging. He had a gleam in his eye, knowing he'd rocked Altaïr, who dodged one flailing punch only to realize it was a feint as the orator caught him across the jaw with his other fist.

Altaïr almost fell, tasting blood and cursing himself. He had underestimated his opponent. A novice mistake. The orator looked frantically around himself as though seeking the best escape route. Altaïr shook the pain from his face and came forward, holding his fists high and catching the orator on the temple before he could move off. For some moments the two traded blows in the alley. The orator was smaller and faster, and caught Altaïr high on the bridge of his nose. The Assassin stumbled, blinking away tears that split his vision. Sensing victory, the orator came forward, throwing wild punches. Altaïr stepped to the side, went low and swept the orator's feet from beneath him, sending him crashing to the sand, the breath whooshing out of him as he landed on his back. Altaïr spun and dropped, sinking his knee directly into the speaker's groin. He was gratified to hear an agonized bark in response, then stood, his shoulders rising and falling heavily as he collected himself. The orator writhed soundlessly in the dirt, mouth wide in a silent scream, his hands at his crotch. When he managed a great gasping breath, Altaïr squatted, bringing his face close to him.

'You seem to know quite a bit about Tamir,' he hissed. 'Tell me what he's planning.'

'I know only the stories I tell,' groaned the speaker. 'Nothing more.'

Altaïr scooped up a handful of dirt and let it trickle through his fingers. 'A pity. There's no reason to let you live if you've nothing to offer in return.'

'Wait. Wait.' The orator held up a trembling hand. 'There is one thing …'

'Continue.'

'He is preoccupied as of late. He oversees the production of many, many weapons …'

‘What of it? They’re meant for Salah Al’din presumably. This does not help me – which means it does not help you …’ Altaïr reached …

‘*No.* Stop. Listen.’ The orator’s eyes rolled and sweat popped on his brow. ‘Not Salah Al’din. They’re for *someone else*. The crests these arms bear, they’re different. Unfamiliar. It seems Tamir supports another … but I know not who.’

Altaïr nodded. ‘Is that all?’ he asked.

‘Yes. Yes. I’ve told you everything I know.’

‘Then it’s time for you to rest.’

‘No,’ began the orator, but there was a snick that sounded as loud as the breaking of crockery in the alley as Altaïr released his blade then drove it through the orator’s sternum, holding the dying man as he shuddered, pinned by the blade, blood foaming from the corners of his mouth and his eyes glazing. A quick death. A clean death.

Altaïr laid him on the sand, reached to close his eyes, then stood. His blade slid back into place, and he pushed the body behind a stack of stinking barrels, then turned and left the alley.

10

‘Altaïr. Welcome. Welcome.’

The leader smirked as he walked in, and Altaïr regarded him for a moment, seeing him shrink a little under his gaze. Did he carry the smell of death? Perhaps the Bureau leader had detected it upon him.

‘I’ve done as you asked. Now give me the marker.’

‘First things first. Tell me what you know.’

Fresh from taking a life, Altaïr reflected that it would be a small matter to add to his day’s tally. He itched to put the man in his place. But no. He had to play his part, no matter how much of a charade he thought it was.

‘Tamir rules the Souk al-Silaah,’ he said, thinking of the merchants talking in hushed tones, the fear on their faces when they spotted Tamir’s orator. ‘He makes his fortune selling arms and armour, and is supported by many in this endeavour: blacksmiths, traders, financiers. He’s the main death dealer in the land.’

The other nodded, hearing nothing he didn’t already know. ‘And have you devised a way to rid us of this blight?’ he asked superciliously.

‘A meeting is being arranged at Souk al-Silaah to discuss an important sale. They say it’s the largest deal Tamir has ever made. He’ll be distracted with his work. That’s when I’ll strike.’

‘Your plan seems solid enough. I give you leave to go.’

He reached below his desk and retrieved Al Mualim’s marker. A feather from one of the Master’s beloved birds. He placed it on the desk between them. ‘Let Al Mualim’s will be done,’ he said, as Altaïr took the marker, stowing it carefully within his robe.

Soon after sunrise he left the Bureau and made his way back to the Souk al-Silaah. When he arrived at the market all eyes seemed to be on a sunken ceremonial courtyard in its centre.

He soon saw why: there stood the merchant Tamir. With two glowering bodyguards at his rear, he commanded the courtyard, towering over a trembling man who stood before him. He wore a chequered turban, smart tunic and leg wrappings. His teeth were bared beneath a dark moustache.

As Altaïr made his way round the outside of the crowd he kept an eye on what was happening. Traders had moved from behind their stalls to see too. The Damascus that either hurried between destinations or stood lost in conversation had come to a temporary standstill.

'If you'd just have a look …' said the man cringing before Tamir.

'I've no interest in your calculations,' snapped Tamir. 'The numbers change nothing. Your men have failed to fill the order – which means I have failed my client.'

Client, thought Altaïr. Who might that be?

The merchant swallowed. His eyes went to the crowd looking for salvation. He found none there. The market guards stood with blank expressions and unseeing eyes while the spectators simply stared, agog. Altaïr was sickened by them, all of them: the vultures watching, the guards who did nothing. But most of all Tamir.

'We need more time,' pleaded the merchant. Perhaps he realized that his only chance lay in persuading Tamir to be merciful.

'That is the excuse of a lazy or incompetent man,' returned the black-marketeer. 'Which are you?'

'Neither,' responded the merchant, wringing his hands.

'What I see says otherwise,' said Tamir. He raised a foot to a low wall and leaned on his knee. 'Now, tell me, what do you intend to do to solve this problem of ours? These weapons are needed *now*.'

'I see no solution,' stammered the merchant. 'The men work day and night. But your … client requires so much. And the destination … It is a difficult route.'

'Would that you could produce weapons with the same skill as you produce excuses,' laughed Tamir. Playing to the crowd, he was rewarded by a chuckle – born more of fear than the quality of his humour.

'I have done all I can,' insisted the older man. Perspiration was flowing freely from the headband of his turban and his grey beard quivered.

'It is not enough.'

'Then perhaps you ask too much,' tried the merchant.

It was a foolhardy gambit. The crowd-pleasing smile slid from Tamir's face and he turned cold eyes on the old man. 'Too much?' he said, a new chill in his voice. 'I gave you everything. Without me you would still be charming serpents for coin. All I asked in return was that you fill the orders I bring you. And you say I ask *too much*?'

He drew his dagger, the blade winking. Those watching shifted uncomfortably. Altaïr looked at the guards, who stood with their arms folded,

sabres in their belts, faces expressionless. Nobody in the souk dared move; it was as though a spell had been cast on them all.

A frightened sound escaped the merchant. He dropped to his knees, holding his clasped hands aloft in supplication. His face was etched with pleading; his eyes gleamed with tears.

Tamir looked down at him, a pathetic creature kneeling before him, and spat. The trader blinked phlegm from his eyes.

'*You dare slander me?*' roared Tamir.

'Peace, Tamir,' whimpered the old man. 'I meant no insult.'

'Then you should have kept your mouth shut,' snarled Tamir.

Altaïr could see the bloodlust in his eyes and knew exactly what was going to happen. Sure enough, Tamir slashed at the merchant with the tip of his dagger, opening a sagging hole in his tunic that was immediately stained red. The merchant fell back to his heels with a keening screech that cut through the marketplace. 'No! Stop!' he squealed.

'Stop?' jeered Tamir. 'I'm just getting started.' He stepped forward, drove his dagger deep into the man's stomach and thrust him to the ground where he screamed like an animal as Tamir stabbed him again. 'You came into *my* souk,' he shouted.

Stab.

'Stood before *my* men.'

Stab. A fourth time. The sound like meat being tenderized. The old man was still screaming.

'And dared to insult me?'

Stab. He punctuated every word with a thrust of his dagger. 'You must learn your place.'

But now the merchant had stopped screaming. Now he was nothing but a battered, bloody corpse sprawled in the courtyard, his head at an odd angle. One of Tamir's bodyguards stepped forward to move the body.

'No,' said Tamir, out of breath. He wiped his beard with the back of his hand. 'Leave it.' He turned to address the crowd. 'Let this be a lesson to the rest of you. Think twice before you tell me something cannot be done. Now get back to work.'

Leaving the old man's body where it was – an interested dog already beginning to sniff around it – the spectators resumed their day, activity in the souk gradually building up so that in a few short moments it was as though nothing had happened. As though the old man was forgotten.

Not by Altaïr, though. He found himself unclenching his fists, letting out a long, slow breath, controlling and harnessing his anger. He bowed his head

slightly, eyes hidden by his cowl, and stole through the crowd after Tamir, who was walking through the market, his two bodyguards not far behind. Coming closer to him, Altaïr overheard him talking to the traders, each of whom stared at him with wide, terrified eyes, agreeing fiercely with everything they were told.

'I can't sell this,' snapped Tamir. 'Melt it down and try again. And if it comes out just as poorly it'll be *you* who gets melted down next.'

Wide eyes. Nod, nod, nod.

'I don't understand what you do all day. Your stall is filled with goods. Your purse should be filled with coin. Why can't you sell these things? It isn't difficult. Perhaps, you are not trying hard enough. Do you require *motivation*?'

The trader was nodding before he realized what was being asked and swiftly amended it to an equally emphatic shake. Tamir moved on. The crowds swirled around him. His bodyguards … Now, was this an opportunity? With the entire market terrified of Tamir, his men had relaxed their guard. They had remained behind at another stall, where they were demanding goods to give as gifts to their wives. Tamir had fresh victims to terrorize.

And now Altaïr slipped between him and the two bodyguards. He tensed, felt the resistance from his blade mechanism on his little finger. Tamir had his back to him, insulting yet another stallholder.

'You begged me for this position. Swore none could do as well as you. I should –'

Altaïr stepped forward, and – *snick* – his blade sprang out as he swept one arm round Tamir and used the other to drive the weapon deep.

Tamir made a strangulated sound but did not scream, and for a second he writhed, before going limp. Over his shoulder, Altaïr met the wide eyes of the terrified stallholder and saw the man wrestling with what to do: raise the alarm or … The trader turned his back and moved away.

Altaïr lowered Tamir to the ground between two stalls, out of sight of the bodyguards, who remained oblivious.

Tamir's eyes fluttered.

'Be at peace,' said Altaïr, gently.

'You'll pay for this, Assassin,' rasped Tamir. A fine line of blood ran from his nose. 'You and all your kind.'

'It seems you're the one who pays now, my friend. You'll not profit from suffering any longer.'

Tamir gave a harsh, shallow laugh. 'You think me some petty death-dealer, suckling at the breast of war? A strange target, perhaps? Why me, when so many others do the same?'

'You believe yourself different, then?' asked Altaïr.

‘Oh, but I am, for I serve a far nobler cause than mere profit. Just like my brothers …’

‘Brothers?’

Again Tamir chuckled weakly. ‘Ah … he thinks I act alone. I am but a piece. A man with a part to play. You’ll come to know the others soon enough. They won’t take kindly to what you’ve done.’

‘Good. I look forward to ending their lives as well.’

‘Such pride. It will destroy you, child,’ said Tamir. And he passed.

‘People have to die for things to change,’ intoned Altaïr, closing the man’s eyes.

He took Al Mualim’s feather from within his robes and stained it with the blood of Tamir, cast a last look at the bodyguards, then moved off, disappearing into the crowds. He was already a ghost when he heard the cry go up behind him.

11

Tamir, the first of the nine: Al Mualim had been quietly satisfied, looking from the blood-stained feather on his desk to Altaïr and praising him, before giving him his next undertaking.

Altair had bowed his head in assent and left the Master. And the next day he had gathered his supplies and set off once more, this time for Acre – a city held as tightly by the Crusaders as Damascus was by Salah Al'din's men. A city wounded by war.

Acre had been hard-won. The Christians had retaken it after a prolonged and bloody siege lasting almost two years. Altaïr had played his part, helping to stop the city's water supply being poisoned by the Templars.

He had been unable to do anything about the poisoning that did occur, though: corpses in the water had spread disease to Muslim and Christian alike – both inside and outside the city walls. Supplies had run dry, and thousands had simply starved to death. Then more Crusaders had arrived to construct more machines, and their attacks had punched holes in the city walls. The Saracens had fought back for long enough to repair the breaches, until Richard the Lionheart's army simply wore the Muslims down and they offered surrender. The Crusaders had moved in to claim the city and take its garrison hostage.

Negotiations between Salah Al'din and Richard for the release of the hostages had commenced, the finer points of which had been muddied by a disagreement between Richard and the Frenchman Conrad de Montferrat, who was unwilling to hand over hostages taken by French forces.

Conrad had returned to Tyre; Richard was on his way to Jaffa where his troops would meet those of Salah Al'din. And left in charge was Conrad's brother, William.

William de Montferrat had ordered the Muslim hostages put to death. Almost three thousand were beheaded.

And so it was that Altaïr found himself conducting his investigations in a city scarred by its recent history: of siege, disease, starvation, cruelty and bloodshed. A city whose residents knew suffering all too well, whose eyes hid sorrow and whose shoulders were stooped with sadness. In the poor areas he encountered

the worst of the suffering. Bodies wrapped in muslin lined the streets, while drunkenness and violence was rife in the ports. The only area of the city not to reek of despair and death was the Chain District, where the Crusaders were based – where Richard had his citadel and William his quarters. From there the Crusaders had pronounced Acre the capital of the Kingdom of Jerusalem, and had used it to stockpile supplies before Richard had set off on the march to Jaffa, leaving William in charge. So far his reign had simply exacerbated the city's problems, which were all too evident – and pressed in on Altaïr as he made his way through the streets. He was grateful to complete his investigations and make his way to the Assassins' Bureau. There the leader, Jabal, sat cooing gently to a pigeon he held. He looked up as Altaïr entered the room.

'Ah, Altaïr,' he said pleasantly. 'A little bird told me you'd be paying a visit …'

He smiled at his own joke, then opened his hands to set the pigeon free. Instead it merely alighted on the counter where it puffed out its chest feathers and began walking to and fro as though mounting an avian guard. Jabal watched it with amused eyes, then adjusted himself on his seat to regard his visitor.

'And who is the poor unfortunate that Al Mualim has chosen to taste your blade, Altaïr?' he asked.

'Al Mualim has ordered the execution of Garnier de Naplouse.'

Jabal started. 'The Grand Master of the Knights Hospitalier?'

Slowly Altaïr nodded. 'Indeed. And I have already determined when and how to strike.'

'Share your knowledge with me, then.' Jabal looked impressed, and with good reason.

Altaïr began: 'He lives and works within his Order's hospital, north-west of here. Rumours speak of atrocities committed within its walls.'

As Altaïr told him what he knew, Jabal nodded thoughtfully, considering his words and asking at length, 'What is your plan?'

'Garnier keeps mainly to his quarters inside the hospital, though he leaves occasionally to inspect his patients. It's when he makes his rounds that I will strike.'

'It's clear you've given this some thought. I give you leave to go.' And with that he handed Altaïr Al Mualim's marker. 'Remove this stain from Acre, Altaïr. Perhaps it will help cleanse your own.'

Altaïr took the marker, fixed Jabal with a baleful look – was every Assassin to be made aware of his shame? – then left, making his way across the city's rooftops until he had sight of the hospital. There he stopped, catching his breath and gathering his thoughts as he looked down upon it.

Altaïr had given Jabal a truncated version of his findings; he had hidden his true feelings of disgust from the Bureau leader. He'd learned that de Naplouse was Grand Master of the Order of the Knights Hospitalier. Originally founded in Jerusalem – their aim to provide care for ailing pilgrims – the Knights had a base in one of Acre's most deprived areas.

And there, according to what Altaïr had learned, de Naplouse was doing anything but providing care.

In the Hospitalier district he had overheard two members of the Order talking about how the Grand Master was turning ordinary citizens away from the hospital, and the people were close to violence because of it. One had said that he feared a repeat of a scandal that had taken place at Tyre.

'What scandal?' his friend had asked.

The man had leaned in close to his companion to finish and Altaïr had been forced to listen hard. 'Garnier once called that city home,' the man had said, 'but he was exiled. It's said he was experimenting on its citizens.'

His companion had looked a little sick. 'What sort of experiments?'

'I don't know the details, but I worry … Has he begun again? Is that why he locks himself away in the Hospitalier fortress?'

Later, Altaïr had read a scroll that he had pickpocketed from an associate of de Naplouse. The Hospitalier had no intention of healing his patients, he read. Supplied with subjects from Jerusalem, he was conducting tests – tests for some unknown master – aimed at inducing certain states in his subjects. And Tamir – the recently deceased Tamir – had been charged with finding arms for the operation.

One particular phrase in the letter caught his eye: *We should endeavour to reclaim what has been taken from us.* What did that mean? Puzzling over it, he continued his enquiries. The Grand Master allowed 'madmen' to wander the grounds of the hospital, he heard, and he discovered the times at which the archers covering the walkways above the hospital left their posts; he learned that de Naplouse liked to make his rounds without a bodyguard and that only monks were allowed passage.

Then, having all the information he needed, Altaïr had visited Jabal to collect Al Mualim's marker.

12

Now he moved around the outside of a building adjacent to the Hospitaliers' fortress. As he had expected, there was a guard, an archer, and Altaïr watched as he paced the walkway, every now and then casting his gaze into the courtyard below, but mainly gazing across the roofline. Altaïr looked at the sun. It should be about now, he thought, smiling to himself as, sure enough, the archer moved to a ladder and let himself down.

Altaïr stayed low. He leaped from the roof to the walkway and quietly scuttled along until he was able to peer over the edge and into the courtyard below. Sheer-walled in dull, grey, forbidding stone, a well stood in its centre, but it was otherwise bare, quite unlike the ornately decorated buildings usually to be found in Acre. There, several guards were wearing the quilted black coats of the Hospitalier knights, the white cross on the chest, and there was also a group of monks. Moving among them were what looked like patients, barefoot and shirtless. Poor wretches who milled aimlessly about, their expressions blank, their eyes glazed.

Altaïr frowned. Even with the walkway unguarded it was impossible to drop into the courtyard unseen. He moved to the entrance wall of the hospital, so that he was able to look into the street outside. On stone painted white by the sun, ailing cityfolk and their families begged the guards to be allowed inside. Others whose minds had gone wandered among the throng, casting their arms into the air, shouting gibberish and obscenities.

And there – Altair smiled to see them – was a group of scholars. They were moving through the crowd as if it wasn't there, heedless of the suffering and tumult around them. They seemed to be going in the direction of the hospital. Taking advantage of the disorder, Altaïr lowered himself into the street unnoticed, joined the ranks of the scholars and lowered his head to concentrate his gaze on his shuffling feet. Every now and then he risked a surreptitious glance to check their bearings and, as he'd hoped, they were heading towards the hospital where the guards stood aside, admitting them to the courtyard.

Altaïr wrinkled his nose. Where the street had held the scent of the city, of baking and perfumes and spices, in here was the stench of suffering, of death and

human waste. From somewhere – through a set of closed doors – there came a series of pained cries, then low moaning. That would be the main hospital, he thought. He was proved correct when, suddenly, the doors were flung open and a patient careered madly into the courtyard.

'*No! Help! Help me!*' he screamed. His face was contorted with fear, his eyes wide. '*Help me, please! You must help me!*'

After him came a guard. He had a lazy eye, as though the muscles in his eyelid had once been cut. He ran after the escaping crazy man, catching him. Then, joined by another guard, he began punching and kicking him until the crazy man was subdued and on his knees.

Altaïr watched. He felt his jaw tighten and his fists clench as the guards beat the man, other patients moving forward to get an improved view of the spectacle, watching with faces that registered only mild interest, swaying slightly.

'Mercy!' howled the crazy man, as the blows rained down on him. 'I beg mercy. No more!'

He stopped. Suddenly his pain was forgotten as the doors to the hospital swung open and there stood a man who could only be Garnier de Naplouse.

He was shorter than Altaïr had expected. He was beardless and had close-cropped white hair, sunken eyes and a cruel, downturned mouth, which gave him a cadaverous look. The white cross of the Hospitalier was on his arms and he wore a crucifix around his neck – but whatever God he worshipped had deserted him, Altaïr saw. For he also wore an apron. A dirty, blood-stained apron.

Now he looked darkly at the crazy man prostrate before him, held by Lazy Eye and the other guard, Lazy Eye raising his fist to punch him again.

'Enough, my child,' ordered de Naplouse. 'I asked you to retrieve the patient, not to kill him.'

Lazy Eye lowered his fist reluctantly as de Naplouse came forward, closer to the crazy man, who moaned and pulled away, like a skittish animal.

De Naplouse smiled, the hardness gone. 'There, there,' he said to the crazy man, almost tenderly. 'Everything will be all right. Give me your hand.'

The crazy man shook his head. 'No – no! Don't touch me. Not again …'

De Naplouse furrowed his brow, as though slightly hurt by the man's reaction to him. 'Cast out this fear, else I cannot help you,' he said evenly.

'Help me? Like you helped the others? You took their *souls*. But not mine. No. You'll not have mine. Never, never, never … *Not mine not mine not mine not mine* …'

The softness was gone as de Naplouse slapped the crazy man. 'Take hold of yourself,' he snarled. His sunken eyes flared and the other's head drooped. 'Do

you think this gives me pleasure? Do you think I *want* to hurt you? But you leave me no choice …'

Suddenly the crazy man had pulled away from the two guards and tried to run into the watching crowd. 'Every kind word matched by the back of his hand …' he screeched, passing close to Altaïr as the two guards rushed after him. 'All lies and deception. He won't be content until all bow before him.'

Lazy Eye caught him, dragged him back before de Naplouse, where he whimpered under the Grand Master's cold gaze.

'You should not have done that,' said de Naplouse, slowly, then to Lazy Eye, 'Return him to his quarters. I'll be along once I've attended to the others.'

'*You can't keep me here!*' shouted the crazy man. '*I'll escape again.*'

De Naplouse stopped. 'No, you won't,' he said evenly, then turned to Lazy Eye. 'Break his legs. Both of them.'

Lazy Eye grinned as the crazy man tried to pull away. Then there were two sickening cracks, like kindling being snapped, as the huge knight stamped first on one leg, then the other. The victim screamed, and Altaïr found himself moving forward, unable to contain himself, seething at the wanton cruelty.

Then the moment had gone: the man had lost consciousness – the pain, no doubt, too much to bear – and the two guards were dragging him away. De Naplouse watched him. The sympathetic look had returned to his face.

'I am so sorry, child,' he said, almost to himself, before turning on the crowd. 'Have you people nothing better to do?' he barked, and stared darkly at the monks and patients, who slowly drifted away. As Altaïr turned his back to join them he saw de Naplouse scanning the throng carefully, as though looking for one who might have been sent to kill him.

Good, thought Altaïr, hearing the door to the hospital close as the Grand Master left the courtyard. Let him be afraid. Let him feel a little of what he inflicts on others. The image warmed him as he joined the scholars, who were moving through a second door. This one led into the main ward, where straw matting did little to hide the reek of suffering and human waste. Altaïr found himself trying not to gag, noticing several of the scholars move the fabric of their robes to their noses to block it out. From in here came the moaning and Altaïr saw hospital beds that contained men who groaned and occasionally cried out with pain. Keeping his head bent, he peered out from beneath his cowl, seeing de Naplouse approach a bed in which an emaciated man lay restrained by leather bindings.

'And how are you feeling?' de Naplouse asked him.

In pain, the patient wheezed, 'What have you done … to me?'

‘Ah, yes. The pain. It hurts at first, I won’t lie. A small price to pay. In time you’ll agree.’

The man tried to lift his head from the bed. ‘You’re … a monster …’

De Naplouse smiled indulgently. ‘I’ve been called worse.’ He moved past a wooden cage that enclosed another bed, peering in at the … no, not a patient, Altaïr realized. These poor wretches were subjects. They were *experiments*. Again he fought to control his anger. He glanced around. Most of the guards had congregated at the other end of the ward. Just as in the courtyard, several disoriented patients were stumbling about, and he saw the same cluster of monks, who seemed to hang on de Naplouse’s every utterance while remaining at a respectful distance, talking among themselves as the Grand Master made his rounds.

If he was going to do it – and he *was* going to do it – then it had to be soon.

But then de Naplouse moved over to another bed, smiling at the man who lay there. ‘They say you can walk now,’ he said kindly. ‘Impressive.’

The man looked confused. ‘Been … so long. Almost forgot … how.’

De Naplouse looked pleased – genuinely pleased. Beaming, he said, ‘That’s wonderful.’

‘I don’t … understand. Why did you help me?’

‘Because no one else would,’ answered de Naplouse, moving on.

‘I owe you my life,’ said the man in the next bed. ‘I am yours to command. Thank you. Thank you for freeing me.’

‘Thank you for letting me,’ replied de Naplouse.

Altaïr faltered a moment. Was he wrong? Was de Naplouse *not* a monster? Then just as quickly he cast his doubts away, thinking instead of the crazy man’s shrieks of agony as they had snapped his legs, the lifeless patients roaming the hospital. If there were indeed examples of healing here, then surely they were outnumbered by the acts of barbarism.

Now de Naplouse had reached the final bed in the ward. In moments he would leave and Altaïr’s chance would be gone. Resolved, the Assassin cast a look behind him: the guards were still occupied at the end of the hall. He moved out of the assembly of scholars, coming up behind de Naplouse as the Grand Master bent to his patient.

Altaïr’s blade sprang forth and he rammed it home, reaching for de Naplouse and stifling his cry as he arched his back in pain. Almost gently, the Assassin lowered the skewered doctor to the floor. ‘Let go your burden,’ he whispered.

De Naplouse blinked and looked up at him – into the face of his Assassin. But there was no fear in those dying eyes: what Altaïr saw was concern. ‘Ah … I’ll

rest now, yes?' he said. 'The endless dream calls to me. But before I close my eyes, I must know – what will become of my children?'

Children? 'You mean the people made to suffer your cruel experiments?' Altaïr couldn't keep the disgust from his voice. 'They'll be free now to return to their homes.'

De Naplouse laughed drily. 'Homes? What homes? The sewers? The brothels? The prisons we dragged them from?'

'You took these people against their will,' said Altaïr.

'Yes. What little will there was for them to have,' gasped de Naplouse. 'Are you really so naïve? Do you appease a crying child simply because he wails? "But I want to play with fire, Father." What would you say? "As you wish"? Ah … but then you'd answer for his burns.'

'These are not children,' said Altaïr, wanting to understand the dying man, 'but men and women full grown.'

'In body, perhaps. But not in mind. Which is the very damage I sought to repair. I admit, without the artefact – which you *stole* from us – my progress was slowed. But there are herbs. Mixtures and extracts. My guards are proof of this. They were madmen before I found and freed them from the prisons of their minds. And, with my death, madmen will they be again …'

'You truly believe you were helping them?'

De Naplouse smiled, the light beginning to leave his eyes. 'It's not what I believe. It's what I know.'

He died. Altaïr lowered his head to the stone and reached for Al Mualim's feather, brushing it with blood. 'Death be not unkind,' he whispered.

In the same moment, a cry went up from the nearby monks. Altaïr straightened from the body and saw guards lumbering down the ward towards him. As they drew their swords he leaped up and ran, heading towards a far door, which, he fervently hoped, led to the courtyard.

It opened and he was pleased to see the courtyard before him.

He was less pleased to see Lazy Eye, who barrelled through the open door, his broadsword drawn …

Altaïr drew his own sword and, with the blade at one arm, his sword in the other hand, met Lazy Eye with a clash of steel. For a second the two men were nose to nose, and Altaïr could see up close the scarred skin of the knight's eye. Then Lazy Eye pushed away, immediately stabbing forward, meeting Altaïr's sword but readjusting so quickly that Altaïr almost missed the defence. The Assassin danced away, wanting to put space between him and Lazy Eye, who was a better swordsman than he had anticipated. He was big, too. The tendons of his neck stood out, developed from years of wielding the huge broadsword.

From behind him Altair heard the other guards arriving, then stopping at a signal from Lazy Eye.

‘I want him,’ growled the giant knight.

He was arrogant, over-confident. Altaïr smiled, savouring the irony. Then he came forward, his blade sweeping up. Grinning, Lazy Eye deflected the blow and was grunting as Altaïr skipped to his left, coming at Lazy Eye from the other side – the side of his damaged eye, his weak spot – and slashing at his neck.

The knight’s throat opened and blood poured from the wound as he sank to his knees. From behind Altaïr there was a surprised cry so he started running, crashing through a collection of crazy men, who had gathered to watch, then sprinting across the courtyard, past the well and under the arch into Acre.

He stopped, scanning the roofline. Next he was vaulting a stall, the angry merchant shaking his fist as he scaled a wall behind him and took to the roofs. Running, jumping, he left the nightmare hospital behind him and melted into the city still mulling over de Naplouse’s last words. The *artefact* he had spoken of. Briefly Altaïr thought of the box on Al Mualim’s desk, but no. What possible connection would the Hospitalier have with that?

But if not that, then what?

13

‘Garnier de Naplouse is dead,’ he had told Al Mualim, days later.

‘Excellent.’ The Master had nodded approvingly. ‘We could not have hoped for a more agreeable outcome.’

‘And yet …’ started Altaïr.

‘What is it?’

‘The doctor insisted his work was noble,’ said Altaïr. ‘And, looking back, of those who were supposedly his captives, many seemed grateful to him. Not all of them, but enough to make me wonder … How did he manage to turn enemy into friend?’

Al Mualim had chuckled. ‘Leaders will always find ways to make others obey them. And that is what makes them leaders. When words fail, they turn to coin. When that won’t do, they resort to baser things: bribes, threats and other types of trickery. There are plants, Altaïr – herbs from distant lands – that can cause a man to take leave of his senses. So great are the pleasures they bring that men may even become enslaved by them.’

Altaïr nodded, thinking of the glazed patients. The crazy man. ‘You think these men were drugged, then? Poisoned?’

‘Yes, if it truly was as you describe it,’ Al Mualim said. ‘Our enemies have accused me of the same.’

Then he had given Altaïr his next task, and Altaïr had wondered why the Master smiled when he told him to complete his enquiries then report to the Assassins’ Bureau *rafiq* in Jerusalem.

Now, walking into the Bureau, he knew why. It was because it amused him to think of Altaïr once more crossing paths with Malik.

The Assassin stood up from behind the desk as Altaïr entered. For a moment the two regarded each other, neither hiding his disdain. Then, slowly, Malik turned, showing Altaïr where his arm had once been.

Altaïr blanched. Of course. Damaged in the fight with de Sable’s men, the best surgeons in Masyaf had been unable to save Malik’s left arm – and so had been forced to amputate.

Malik smiled the bittersweet smile of victory that had come at too high a price, and Altaïr remembered himself. He remembered that he had no business treating Malik with anything but humility and respect. He bowed his head to acknowledge the other man's losses. His brother. His arm. His status.

'Safety and peace, Malik,' he said at last.

'Your presence here deprives me of both,' spat Malik. He, however, had plenty of business treating Altaïr with disdain – and evidently intended to do so. 'What do you want?'

'Al Mualim has asked –'

'That you perform some task in an effort to redeem yourself?' sneered Malik. 'So. Out with it. What have you learned?'

'This is what I know,' answered Altaïr. 'The target is Talal, who traffics in human lives, kidnapping Jerusalem's citizens and selling them into slavery. His base is a warehouse located inside the barbican north of here. As we speak, he prepares a caravan for travel. I'll strike while he's inspecting his stock. If I can avoid his men, Talal himself should prove little challenge.'

Malik curled his lip. ' "Little challenge"? Listen to you. Such arrogance.'

Silently Altaïr rebuked himself. Malik was right. He thought of the orator in Damascus whom he had misjudged and who had almost bested him.

'Are we finished?' he asked, showing none of his thoughts to Malik. 'Are you satisfied with what I've learned?'

'No,' said Malik, handing Altaïr the feather, 'but it will have to do.'

Altaïr nodded. He looked at where Malik's sleeve hung loose and was about to say something before he realized that no words would atone for his failures. He had cost Malik too much ever to hope for forgiveness from him.

Instead, he turned and left the Bureau. Another target was to feel the kiss of his blade.

14

Shortly afterwards Altaïr was stealing into the warehouse where the shipment was being prepared, looking around and not liking what he found.

There were no guards. No acolytes.

He took two steps forward, then stopped. No. What was he thinking? Everything about the warehouse was wrong. He was about to spin and leave when suddenly the door was shut and there was the unmistakable sound of a bolt slamming home.

He cursed and drew his sword.

He crept forward, his senses gradually adjusting to the gloom, the damp, the smell of the torches and …

Something else. A livestock smell that Altaïr thought was more human than animal.

Meagre flames from the torches threw light on walls that ran dark and slick, and from somewhere came a drip-drip of water. The next sound he heard was a low moan.

Eyes slowly adjusting, he edged forward, seeing crates and barrels and then … a cage. He moved closer – and almost recoiled at what he saw. A man was inside it. A pathetic, shivering man, who sat with his legs pulled to his chest and regarded Altaïr with plaintive, watery eyes. He raised one trembling hand. ‘Help me,’ he said.

Then, from behind, Altaïr heard another sound and wheeled to see a second man. He was suspended from the wall, his wrists and ankles shackled. His head lolled on his chest and dirty hair hung over his face, but his lips appeared to be moving as though in prayer.

Altaïr moved towards him. Then, hearing another voice from his feet, he looked down to see an iron grille set into the flagstones of the warehouse floor. Peering from it was the frightened face of yet another slave, his bony fingers reaching through the bars, appealing to Altaïr. Beyond him in the pit the Assassin saw more dark forms, heard slithering and more voices. For a moment it was as though the room was filled with the pleading of those imprisoned.

‘Help me, help me.’

An insistent, beseeching sound that made him want to cover his ears. Until, suddenly, he heard a louder voice: ‘You should not have come here, Assassin.’

Talal, surely.

Altaïr swung in the direction of the noise, seeing the shadows shift in a balcony above him. Bowmen? He tensed, crouching, his sword ready, offering the smallest target possible.

But if Talal wanted him dead, he’d be dead by now. He’d walked straight into the slave trader’s trap – the mistake of a fool, of a novice – but it had not yet been fully sprung.

‘But you are not the kind to listen,’ mocked Talal, ‘lest you compromise your Brotherhood.’

Altair crept forward, still trying to place Talal. He was above, that much was certain. But where?

‘Did you think I’d remain ignorant of your presence?’ continued the disembodied voice, with a chuckle. ‘You were known to me the moment you entered this city, such is my reach.’

From below he heard sobbing and glanced down to see more bars, more dirty, tear-streaked faces staring at him from the gloom.

‘*Help me … Save me …*’

Here there were more cages, more slaves, men and women now: beggars, prostitutes, drunkards and madmen.

‘Help me. Help me.’

‘So there are slaves here,’ called Altaïr, ‘but where are the slavers?’

Talal ignored him. ‘Behold my work in all its glory,’ he announced, and more lights flared on, revealing more frightened and beseeching faces.

Ahead of Altaïr a second gate slid open, admitting him to another room. He climbed a flight of steps and walked into a large space with a gallery running along all sides above him. There he saw shadowy figures and adjusted the grip on his sword.

‘What now, slaver?’ he called.

Talal was trying to frighten him. Some things frightened Altaïr, it was true – but nothing the slave master was capable of, that much he knew.

‘Do not call me that,’ cried Talal. ‘I only wish to help them. As I myself was helped.’

Altair could still hear the low moans of the slaves from the chamber behind. He doubted whether they’d consider it help. ‘You do no kindness imprisoning them like this,’ he called into the darkness.

Still Talal remained hidden. ‘Imprisoning them? I keep them safe, preparing them for the journey that lies ahead.’

‘What journey?’ scoffed Altaïr. ‘It is a life of servitude.’

‘You know nothing. It was folly to bring you here. To think that you might see and understand.’

‘I understand well enough. You lack the courage to face me, choosing to hide among the shadows. Enough talk. Show yourself.’

‘Ah … So you want to see the man who called you here?’

Altaïr heard movement in the gallery.

‘You did not call me here,’ he shouted. ‘I came on my own.’

Laughter echoed from the balconies above him.

‘Did you?’ scoffed Talal. ‘Who unbarred the door? Cleared the path? Did you raise your blade against a single man of mine, hmm? No. All this I did for you.’

Something moved on the ceiling above the gallery, throwing a patch of light on to the stone floor.

‘Step into the light, then,’ called Talal from above, ‘and I will grant you one final favour.’

Again, Altaïr told himself that if Talal wanted him dead his archers would have filled him with arrows by now, and he stepped into the light. As he did so, masked men appeared from the shadows of the gallery, jumping down and noiselessly surrounding him. They regarded him with dispassionate eyes, their swords hanging by their sides, their chests rising and falling.

Altaïr swallowed. There were six of them. ‘Little challenge’ they were not.

Then there came footsteps from above and he looked to the gallery where Talal had moved out of the half-light and now stood gazing down at him. He wore a striped tunic and a thick belt. Over his shoulder was a bow.

‘Now I stand before you,’ he said, spreading his hands, smiling as though warmly welcoming a guest to his household. ‘What is it you desire?’

‘Come down here.’ Altair indicated with his sword. ‘Let us settle this with honour.’

‘Why must it always come to violence?’ replied Talal, sounding almost disappointed in Altaïr, before adding, ‘It seems I cannot help you, Assassin, for you do not wish to help yourself. And I cannot allow my work to be threatened. You leave me no choice: you must die.’

He waved to his men.

Who lifted their swords.

Then attacked.

Altaïr grunted and found himself fending off two at once, pushing them back, then straight away turning his attention to a third. The others waited their turn: their strategy, he quickly realized, was to come at him two at a time.

He could handle that. He grabbed one, pleased to see his eyes widen in shock above his mask, then threw him backwards into a fifth man, the pair of them smashing into a scaffold that disintegrated around them. Altaïr pressed home his advantage and, stabbing with his swordpoint, heard a scream and a death rattle from the man sprawled on the stone.

His assailants reassembled, glancing at one another as they slowly circled him. He turned with them, sword held out, smiling, almost enjoying himself now. Five of them, trained, masked killers, against a lone Assassin. They had thought him easy prey. He could see it in their faces. One skirmish later and they weren't quite so certain.

He chose one. An old trick taught to him by Al Mualim for when facing multiple opponents.

Altaïr very deliberately fixed his gaze on a guard directly in front of him …

Don't ignore the others but home in on one. Make him your target. Let him know he's your target.

He smiled. The guard whimpered.

Then finish him.

Like a snake, Altaïr struck, coming at the guard, who was too slow to react – who stared down at Altaïr's blade as it thrust into his chest, then groaned as he sank to his knees. With a tearing of meat, Altaïr withdrew his sword, then turned his attention to the next man.

Choose one of your opponents.…

The guard looked terrified, not like a killer now, as his sword began trembling. He shouted something in a dialect Altaïr didn't understand, then came forward messily, hoping to bring the battle to Altaïr, who sidestepped, slashing at the man's stomach, gratified to see glistening insides spill from the wound. From above Talal's voice cajoled his men to attack even as another fell and the two remaining attacked at once. They didn't look so intimidating now, masks or not. They looked like what they were: frightened men about to die.

Altaïr took another down, blood fountaining from a slashed neck. The last turned and ran, hoping to find shelter in the gallery. But Altaïr sheathed his sword, palmed a pair of throwing knives, which spun, glittering – *one, two* – into the escaping man's back so that he fell from the ladder. Escaping no more.

Altaïr heard running footsteps from above. Talal making his escape. Bending to retrieve his knives, he took the ladder himself, reaching the second level just in time to see Talal scramble up a second series of steps to the roof.

The Assassin went after him, arriving through a hatch in the top of the warehouse and only just jerking his head back in time as an arrow smacked, quivering, into the wood beside him. He saw the bowman on a far rooftop,

already fitting a second shaft, and pulled himself from the hatch, rolling forward on the rooftop and tossing two knives, still wet with the blood of their previous victim.

The archer screamed and fell, one knife protruding from his neck, the other in his chest. Further across, Altaïr saw Talal darting across a bridge between housing then jumping to a scaffold and shimmying down into the street. There, he craned his neck, saw Altaïr already following him, and set off at a run.

Altaïr was already gaining. He was quick and, unlike Talal, he wasn't constantly looking over his shoulder to see if he was being followed. Which meant he wasn't barrelling into unsuspecting pedestrians as Talal was: women who screeched and reprimanded him, men who swore and shoved him back.

All this slowed his progress through the streets and markets, so that soon he had squandered his lead, and when he turned his head Altaïr could see the whites of his eyes.

'Flee now,' Talal screamed over his shoulder, 'while you still can. My guards will be here soon.'

Altaïr chuckled. Kept running.

'Give up this chase and I'll let you live,' screeched Talal. Altaïr said nothing. Kept up his pursuit. Nimbly, he wove through the crowds, hurdling the goods that Talal pulled behind himself to slow his pursuer. Altaïr was gaining on Talal now, the chase almost done.

Ahead of him Talal turned his head once more, saw that the gap was closing and tried appealing to Altaïr again.

'Hold your ground and hear me out,' he bellowed, desperation in his voice. 'Perhaps we can make a deal.'

Altaïr said nothing, just watched as Talal turned again. The slave trader was now about to collide with a woman whose face was hidden by several flasks. Neither of them was looking where they were going.

'I've done nothing to you,' shouted Talal, forgetting, presumably, that just minutes ago he had sent six men to kill Altaïr. 'Why do you persist in chasing –'

The breath left his body in a whoosh, there was a tangle of arms and legs and Talal crashed to the sand along with the flask woman, whose wares smashed around them.

Talal tried scrambling to his feet but was too slow and Altaïr was upon him. *Snick.* As soon as his greedy blade appeared he had sunk it into the man, and was kneeling beside him, blood already gushing from Talal's nose and mouth. At their side, the flask woman dragged herself to her feet, red-faced and indignant, about to let fly at Talal. On seeing Altaïr and his blade, not to mention the blood leaking from Talal, she changed her mind and dashed off wailing. Others gave

them a wide berth, sensing something was amiss. In Jerusalem, a city accustomed to conflict, the inhabitants preferred not to stand and stare at violence for fear of becoming part of it.

Altaïr leaned close to Talal. ‘You’ve nowhere to run now,’ he said. ‘Share your secrets with me.’

‘My part is played, Assassin,’ responded Talal. ‘The Brotherhood is not so weak that my death will stop its work.’

Altaïr’s mind flashed back to Tamir. He, too, had spoken of others as he died. He, too, had mentioned brothers. ‘What Brotherhood?’ he pressed.

Talal managed a smile. ‘Al Mualim is not the only one with designs upon the Holy Land. And that’s all you’ll have from me.’

‘Then we are finished. Beg forgiveness from your God.’

‘There is no God, Assassin.’ Talal laughed weakly. ‘And if there ever was, he’s long abandoned us. Long abandoned the men and women I took into my arms.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Beggars. Whores. Addicts. Lepers. Do they strike you as proper slaves? Unfit for even the most menial tasks. No … I took them not to sell, but to *save*. And yet you’d kill us all. For no other reason than it was asked of you.’

‘No,’ said Altaïr, confused now. ‘You profit from the war. From lives lost and broken.’

‘You would think that, ignorant as you are. Wall off your mind, eh? They say it’s what your kind does best. Do you see the irony in all this?’

Altaïr stared at him. It was just as it had been with de Naplouse. The dying man’s words threatened to subvert everything Altaïr knew of his target – or thought he knew, at least.

‘No, not yet, it seems.’ Talal allowed himself one final smile at Altaïr’s evident confusion. ‘But you will.’

And, with that, he died.

Altaïr reached to close his eyes, murmuring, ‘I’m sorry,’ before brushing his marker with blood, then standing and losing himself in the crowds, Talal’s corpse staining the sand behind him.

15

Altaïr would make camp at wells, waterholes or fountains on his travels; anywhere there was water and shade from palms, where he could rest and his mount graze on the grass, untethered. It was often the only patch of green as far as the eye could see so there was little chance of his horse wandering off.

That night he found a fountain that had been walled and arched to prevent the desert swallowing the precious water spot, and he drank well. Then he lay down in its shelter, listening to dripping from the other side of the rough-hewn stone and thinking of the life ebbing away from Talal. His thoughts went even further back, to the corpses in his past. A life punctuated by death.

As a young boy he had first encountered it during the siege. Assassin and Saracen and, of course, his own father, though mercifully he had been spared the sight of that. He had heard it, though, heard the sword fall, followed by a soft thump, and he'd darted towards the wicket gate, wanting to join his father, when hands had gripped him.

He had squirmed, screaming, 'Let me go! Let me go!'

'No, child.' And Altaïr saw that it was Ahmad, the agent whose life Altaïr's father had traded for his own. And Altaïr stared at him, eyes burning with hatred, not caring that Ahmad had been delivered from his ordeal battered and bloody and barely able to stand, his soul scarred with the shame of having succumbed to the Saracens' interrogation. Caring only that his father had given himself up to die and …

'*It's your fault!*' he had screamed, twisting and pulling away from Ahmad, who stood with his head bowed, absorbing the boy's words as if they were punches.

'It's your fault,' Altaïr had spat again, then sat on the brittle grass, burying his head in his hands, wanting to shut out the world. A few steps away, Ahmad, exhausted and beaten, had folded to the ground also.

Outside the citadel walls, the Saracens departed, leaving the headless body of Altaïr's father behind for the Assassins to retrieve. Leaving wounds that would never heal.

For the time being Altaïr had stayed in the quarters he had shared with his father, with their walls of grey stone, rushes on the floor, a simple desk between two pallets, one larger, one smaller. He'd moved beds: he had slept in the larger one, so that he could smell his father's smell, and he had imagined him sometimes, in the room, sitting reading at the desk, scratching away at a roll of parchment, or returning late at night to chide Altaïr for still being awake, then snuffing out his candle before retiring. Imaginings were all he had now, the orphan Altaïr. Those and his memories. Al Mualim had said he would be called in due course, when arrangements had been made for his future. In the meantime, the Master had said, if Altaïr needed anything, he should come to him as his mentor.

Ahmad, meanwhile, had been suffering from a fever. Some nights his ravings were heard throughout the citadel. Occasionally he screamed as if in pain, at other times like a man deranged. One night he was shouting one word over and over again. Altaïr had pulled himself from his bed and gone to his window, thinking that what he heard was his father's name.

It was. '*Umar.*' Hearing it was like being slapped.

'*Umar*.' The shriek seemed to echo in the empty courtyard below. '*Umar*.'

No, not empty. Peering more closely, Altaïr could make out the figure of a child of about his age, who stood like a sentinel in the soft early-morning mist that rippled across the training yard. It was Abbas. Altaïr barely knew him, just that he was Abbas Sofian, the son of Ahmad Sofian. The boy had stood listening to his father's demented ravings, perhaps offering silent prayers for him, and Altaïr had watched him for a few heartbeats, finding something to admire in his silent vigil. Then he had let his curtain drop and returned to his bed, putting his hands over his ears so that he could no longer hear Ahmad calling his father's name. He had tried to breathe in his father's scent and realized that it was fading.

They said that Ahmad's fever had abated the next day, and that he had returned to his quarters, albeit a broken man. Altaïr had heard that he lay on his bed attended to by Abbas. That he had lain that way for two days.

The next night Altaïr was awoken by a sound in his room and lay blinking, hearing somebody moving about, feet that went to the desk. A candle was put down that threw shadows on the stone wall. It was his father, he thought, still half asleep. His father had come back for him, and he sat up, smiling, ready to welcome him home and be chided by him for being awake. At last he had woken from a terrible dream in which his father had died and left him alone.

But the man in his room was not his father. It was Ahmad.

Ahmad was standing at the door, emaciated within his white robe, his face a pale mask. He wore a faraway, almost peaceful expression, and he smiled a little

as Altaïr sat up, as though he didn't want to frighten the boy. His eyes, though, were sunken dark hollows as if pain had burned the life from within him. And in his hand he held a dagger.

'I'm sorry,' he said, and they were the only words he spoke, his last words, because next he drew the knife across his throat, opening a gaping red mouth in his own neck.

Blood swept down his robe; bubbles of it formed at the wound on his neck. The dagger dropped with a clunk to the floor and he smiled as he slid to his knees, his gaze fixed on Altaïr, who sat rigid with fear, unable to take his eyes from Ahmad as the blood poured from him, draining out of him. Now the dying man lolled back on his heels, at last breaking that ghastly stare as his head dropped to the side, but he was prevented from falling backwards by the door. And for some heartbeats that was how he remained, a penitent man, kneeling. Then at last he fell forward.

Altaïr had no idea how long he sat there, weeping softly and listening to Ahmad's blood spreading thickly across the stone. At last he found the courage to step out of bed, taking the candle and carefully skirting the bleeding horror that lay on the floor. He pulled his door open, whimpering as it made contact with Ahmad's foot. Outside the room at last, he ran. The candle snuffed out but he didn't care. He ran until he reached Al Mualim.

'You must never tell anyone of this,' Al Mualim had said, the next day. Altaïr had been given a warm spiced drink, then spent the rest of the night in the Master's chambers, where he had slept soundly. The Master himself had been elsewhere, attending to Ahmad's body. So it had proved the next day, when Al Mualim returned to him, taking a seat by his bed.

'We shall tell the Order that Ahmad left under cover of darkness,' he said. 'They may draw their own conclusions. We cannot allow Abbas to be tainted with the shame of his father's suicide. What Ahmad has done is dishonourable. His disgrace would spread to his kin.'

'But what of Abbas, Master?' said Altaïr. 'Will he be told the truth?'

'No, my child.'

'But he should at least know that his father is –'

'*No*, my child,' repeated Al Mualim, his voice rising. 'Abbas will be told by no one, including you. Tomorrow I shall announce that you are both to become novices in the Order, that you are to be brothers in all but blood. You will share quarters. You will train and study and dine together. As brothers. You will look after each other. See no harm comes to the other, either physical or by other means. Do I make myself clear?'

‘Yes, Master.’

Later that day Altaïr was installed in quarters with Abbas. A meagre room: two pallets, rush matting, a small desk. Neither boy liked it but Abbas said he would be leaving shortly, when his father returned. At night he was fitful and sometimes called out in his sleep, while in the next bed Altaïr lay awake, afraid to sleep in case the nightmares of Ahmad uncoiled themselves and came to him.

They did. Ahmad had come to him at night ever since. He came with a dagger that gleamed in the dancing candlelight. Slowly he drew the blade across his own throat, grinning as he did so.

Altaïr awoke. The desert was cool and still around him. The palm trees rustled slightly in a breeze and the water drip-dripped behind him. He passed a hand across his brow and realized he had been sweating. He laid his head down again, hoping to sleep at least until light.

Part Two

16

‘You’ve done well,’ said Al Mualim, the following day. ‘Three of the nine lie dead, and for this you have my thanks.’ His smile faded. ‘But do not think to rest upon your laurels. Your work has just begun.’

‘I am yours to command, Master,’ said Altaïr, solemnly. He was exhausted but grateful that he was beginning to redeem himself in Al Mualim’s eyes. Certainly he had seen a change in the guards. Where before they had looked at him with disdain, now they gave him grudging respect. Word of his success had reached them, no doubt. Al Mualim, also, had awarded him the beginnings of a smile and indicated for him to sit. *Sit*.

The Master continued: ‘King Richard, emboldened by his victory at Acre, prepares to move south, towards Jerusalem. Salah Al’din is surely aware of this, and so he gathers his men before the broken citadel of Arsuf.’

Altaïr thought of Salah Al’din and tensed. His mind went back to that day, the Saracens at the gates of the fortress …

‘Would you have me kill them both, then?’ he said, relishing the possibility of putting the Saracen leader to his blade. ‘End their war before it begins in earnest?’

‘No,’ snapped Al Mualim, studying him so carefully that Altaïr felt as though his thoughts were being read. ‘To do so would scatter their forces – and subject the realm to the bloodlust of ten thousand aimless warriors. It will be many days before they meet, and while they march, they do not fight. You must concern yourself with a more immediate threat: the men who pretend to govern in their absence.’

Altaïr nodded. He put away his visions of revenge to be inspected another day. ‘Give me names and I’ll give you blood.’

‘So I will. Abu’l Nuqoud, the wealthiest man in Damascus. Majd Addin, regent of Jerusalem. William de Montferrat, liege lord of Acre.’

He knew the names, of course. Each of the cities bore its leader’s pernicious imprint. ‘What are their crimes?’ asked Altaïr. He wondered if, like the others, there would be more to these crimes than met the eye.

Al Mualim spread his hands. ‘Greed. Arrogance. The slaughter of innocents. Walk among the people of their cities. You’ll learn the secrets of their sins. Do not doubt that these men are obstacles to the peace we seek.’

‘Then they will die,’ said Altaïr, obediently.

‘Return to me as each man falls that we might better understand their intentions,’ ordered Al Mualim, ‘and, Altaïr, take care. Your recent work has likely attracted the attention of the guards. They’ll be more suspicious than they’ve been in the past.’

So it appeared. For, days later, when Altaïr strode into the Bureau at Acre, Jabal greeted him with ‘Word has spread of your deeds, Altaïr.’

He nodded.

‘It seems you are sincere in your desire to redeem yourself.’

‘I do what I can.’

‘And sometimes you do it well. I assume it is work that reunites us?’

‘Yes. William de Montferrat is my target.’

‘Then the Chain District is your destination … But be on your toes. That section of the city is home to King Richard’s personal quarters, and it is under heavy watch.’

‘What can you tell me of the man himself?’

‘William has been named regent while the King conducts his war. The people see it as a strange choice, given the history between Richard and William’s son, Conrad. But I think Richard rather clever for it.’

‘Clever how?’

Jabal smiled. ‘Richard and Conrad do not see eye to eye on most matters. Though they are civil enough in public, there are whispers that each intends evil upon the other. And then there was the business with Acre’s captured Saracens …’ Jabal shook his head. ‘In its wake, Conrad has returned to Tyre, and Richard has compelled William to remain here as his guest.’

‘You mean his hostage?’ asked Altaïr. He was inclined to agree with Jabal. It did indeed look like a wise move on Richard’s part.

‘Whatever you call it, William’s presence should keep Conrad in line.’

‘Where would you suggest I begin my search?’

Jabal thought. ‘Richard’s citadel, south-west of here … Or, rather, the market in front of it.’

‘Very well. I won’t disturb you any further.’

‘It’s no trouble,’ said Jabal, who went back to his birds, cooing gently at them.

He was a man unburdened by many worries, thought Altaïr. For that at least, he envied him.

17

Jabal was right, thought Altaïr, as he made his way through hot, crowded streets tangy with sea air, to the citadel market. There were many more guards about, perhaps double the number since his last visit. Some wore the colours of the Crusaders, and were in full armour. However, if he knew one thing about soldiers it was that they liked to gossip, and the more there were, the more indiscreet they were likely to be. He took a place on a bench, and sat as though to admire the grand citadel with its fluttering pennants, or as if simply to watch the day go by. Not far away an entertainer tried to drum up trade, then shrugged and began anyway, tossing coloured balls into the air. Altaïr pretended to watch him but was listening to a conversation taking place over the way, a couple of Crusaders chattering like washerwomen about William's sword skills.

As Altair watched, a soldier's eye was caught by a friar, a tall man in brown hooded robes, who was signalling discreetly to him. The soldier nodded almost imperceptibly, bade his friend goodbye and moved across the market. Watching from beneath his cowl, Altaïr stood and followed as the two men met and moved away from the hustle and bustle to talk; Altaïr positioned himself close by, straining to hear as the friar spoke.

'Perhaps it was unwise to embrace William. He is old and thinks too much of himself.'

The soldier pursed his lips. 'His army is large. We'll have need of them. For now, I'll go and visit the other brothers. Make sure they have everything they need.'

'Aye. They must not fall,' agreed the friar.

'Fear not. The Master has a plan. Even now he prepares a way to turn our losses to his advantage, should it come to that.'

Master? Altaïr wondered. *Brothers?* Just who did these men answer to? Acre had more layers than an onion.

'What does he intend?' asked the friar.

'The less you know, the better. Just do as you've been instructed. Deliver this letter to the Master.' He passed it to the friar and Altaïr smiled, already flexing

his fingertips. He stood from the bench and followed. One lift later the scroll was his, and he sat once again to read it.

Master:

Work continues in the Chain District of Acre though we are concerned about William's ability to see this through to the end. He takes his duties a bit too seriously, and the people may reject him when the time comes. Without the aid of the treasure, we can ill afford an uprising, lest it recall the King from the field. And then your plan will be for nothing. We cannot reclaim what's been stolen unless the two sides are united. Perhaps you might prepare another to take his place – simply as a precaution. We worry that our man in the harbour will become increasingly unstable. Already he talks of distancing himself. And this means we cannot rely on him should William fall. Let us know what you intend that we might execute it. We remain ever faithful to the cause.

He folded the letter and pushed it into his robes. Something to show Al Mualim, perhaps. Then again, maybe not. So far Altaïr felt Al Mualim had been less than open with him regarding his targets. Perhaps this was part of his test. Perhaps.

A group of servants hurried past. The juggler juggled; he had a bigger crowd now. Not far away a speaker had taken up position in the shade of a tree and was talking against King Richard.

Next Altaïr's attention was arrested by a young man with a close-trimmed black beard who seemed to be appealing to citizens as they passed, at the same time keeping an eye on a pair of city guards stationed a short distance away.

'William de Montferrat cares *nothing* for the people of Acre,' he was saying. Altaïr loitered to listen, careful not to catch his eye. 'While we starve, the men inside his keep want for nothing. They grow fat upon the fruits of our labour. He brought us here to rebuild, he said. But now, far from home, and the grace of our king, his true plan becomes apparent. He steals our sons, sending them into battle against a savage enemy. Their deaths are all but guaranteed. Our daughters are taken to service his soldiers, robbed of their virtue. And he compensates us with lies and empty promises of a better morrow – of a land blessed by God. What of now? What of today? How much longer must we go without? Is this truly the work of God – or of a selfish man who seeks to conquer all? Rise up, people of Acre. Join us in our protest.'

'Be quiet,' called a woman passer-by, gesturing in the direction of guards who were peering along the street, perhaps aware that rabble-rousing was afoot.

'You're a fool,' agreed another, harshly. He turned away with a dismissive wave of the hand. Nobody in Acre wanted to witness William's anger, or so it seemed.

'Your words will see you hanged,' whispered another, who slunk away.

Altaïr watched as the rebel cast a wary glance, then stepped into the crowd and joined another man there. ‘How many have you called to our cause?’ he asked.

‘I fear they are all too afraid,’ answered his companion. ‘None would heed the call.’

‘We must keep trying. Find another market. Another square. We must not be silenced.’

With a final backwards glance at the soldiers, they moved off. Altaïr watched them go, satisfied he had discovered all that he needed to know about William de Montferrat.

He took a final look at the citadel, towering over the marketplace, the black beating heart of Acre. In there, somewhere, was his target, he thought, and with William dead, the people of Acre would know less tyranny, less fear. The sooner that happened, the better. It was time to revisit Jabal.

The Bureau leader was, as ever, in a jovial mood. His eyes twinkled as he greeted Altaïr.

‘I’ve done as I was asked,’ said Altaïr. ‘I’ve armed myself with knowledge. I know what I must do to reach Montferrat.’

‘Speak, then, and I will judge.’

‘William’s host is large and many men call him master. But he is not without enemies. He and King Richard do not see eye to eye.’

Jabal raised an eyebrow. ‘It’s true. They’ve never been close.’

‘This works to my advantage. Richard’s visit has upset him. Once the King has left, William will retreat into his fortress to brood. He’ll be distracted. That is when I will strike.’

‘You’re sure of this?’

‘As sure as I can be. And if things change, I’ll adapt.’

‘Then I give you leave to go. End the life of de Montferrat that we may call this city free.’ Jabal handed him the feather.

‘I’ll return when the deed’s been done,’ answered Altaïr.

18

Altaïr returned to the citadel, expecting it to be just as he had left it. But there was something different now – something he detected as he wove through the streets and came closer to it. It was in the air. Excitement. Expectation. He heard gossip concerning Richard's visit. He was in the fortress now, the citizens said, holding talks with de Montferrat. Apparently the King was furious with him over his treatment of the three thousand held hostage when the Crusaders had retaken the city.

Despite himself, Altaïr felt a thrill. Richard the Lionheart's reputation came before him. His bravery. His cruelty. So to see him in the flesh …

He moved through the marketplace. The crowds were thicker now as word spread that Richard had arrived. Acre's citizens, whatever their opinions of the English King, wanted to see him.

'He comes,' whispered a woman nearby. Altaïr felt himself carried by the crowd, and for almost the first time since entering the city he was able to hold up his head. The crowds were his disguise and, anyway, the guards were too occupied with the King's imminent arrival to take any interest in him.

Now the mob surged forward, taking Altaïr with it. He allowed himself to be enclosed by bodies and carried towards the decorated stone gates, where the flags of the Crusaders fluttered in the breeze, as though they, too, were keen to see Richard. At the gates, the soldiers warned the crowds to move back and those at the front began calling for those at the rear to stop pushing forward. Still more citizens arrived, though, surging towards the raised area in front of the main gates. More guards formed a shield around the entrance. Some had their hands on the hilts of their swords. Others brandished pikes menacingly, snarling, 'Back with you,' at the seething, complaining crowd.

Suddenly there was a great commotion from the fortress gates, which, grinding, rose. Altaïr craned his neck to see, first hearing the clip-clop of horses' hoofs, then seeing the helmets of the King's bodyguards. Next the crowd was kneeling, Altaïr following suit, though his eyes were fixed on the arrival of the King.

Richard the Lionheart sat on a splendid stallion adorned with his livery, his shoulders back and his chin high. His face was worn, as though carrying the imprint of every battle, every desert crossed, and his eyes were weary but bright. Around him was his bodyguard, also on their horses, and walking at his side another man, this one, Altaïr realized from the crowd's murmurings, William de Montferrat. He was older than the King, and lacked his bulk and power, but there was a litheness about him; Altaïr could see he might well be a skilled swordsman. There was a look of displeasure about him as he walked by the side of the King, small in his shadow and heedless of the crowds surrounding them. Lost in his own thoughts.

'… three thousand souls, William,' the King was saying, loud enough for the entire marketplace to hear. 'I was told they would be held as prisoners – and used to barter for the release of our men.'

'The Saracens would not have honoured their side of the bargain,' replied de Montferrat. 'You know this to be true. I did you a favour.'

The Lionheart roared. 'Oh, yes. A great favour, indeed. Now our enemies will be that much stronger in their convictions. Fight that much harder.'

They stopped.

'I know our enemy well,' said de Montferrat. 'They will not be emboldened but filled with fear.'

Richard looked at him disdainfully. 'Tell me, how is it you know the intentions of our enemy so well? You, who forsake the field of battle to play at politics.'

De Montferrat swallowed. 'I did what was right. What was just.'

'You swore an oath to uphold the work of God, William. But that is not what I see here. No. I see a man who's trampled it.'

De Montferrat looked queasy. Then, sweeping an arm around him, as if to remind the King that their subjects were within earshot, he said, 'Your words are most unkind, my liege. I had hoped to earn your trust by now.'

'You are Acre's regent, William, set to rule in my stead. How much more *trust* is required? Perhaps you'd like my crown.'

'You miss the point,' said Montferrat. Not wanting to lose face before the crowd he added, 'But then again, you always do …'

Richard glowered. 'Much as I'd like to waste my day trading words with you, I've a war to fight. We'll continue this another time.'

'Do not let me delay you, then,' said de Montferrat, politely, 'Your Grace.'

Richard afforded de Montferrat one last furious stare – a stare to remind a rebellious underling of exactly who wore the crown – then left, his men falling in behind him.

The crowd began to get to their feet and de Montferrat turned to say something to one of his guards. Altaïr strained to hear.

‘I fear there will be no place for men like him in the New World. Send word that I wish to speak with the troops. We must ensure everyone is doing their part. Warn them that any negligence will be severely punished. I’m in no mood to be trifled with today.’ Then he turned to the rest of his men. ‘Follow me.’

Suddenly there was a great surge towards the fortress, not just of de Montferrat’s guards but of traders hoping to find custom inside. Altaïr joined them, buffeted by their hessian sacks but staying in the crush and just squeezing through the gates before the guardsmen took control and slammed them shut. Inside, traders were being herded by irritated soldiers towards a courtyard, there to display their wares, no doubt. But Altaïr could see de Montferrat making his way along the lower bailey and towards the inner curtain. He ducked to one side and squeezed into a gap between the wall and an inner building, holding his breath, half expecting to hear a shout from a sharp-eyed guard who had seen him slip away. There was none. He looked upwards, and was pleased to see handholds in the sandstone surface of the building. He began to climb.

Archer.

Of course. He’d been so pleased to elude the sentries down below that Altaïr had forgotten to consider those above. He stole another look over the edge of the roof, waiting for the man to turn his back. He needed him in the middle of the roof. Didn’t want him falling into the fortress and raising the alarm. When the guard reached the right spot, Altaïr struck, the throwing knife glittering in the sun, then burying itself in the sentry’s back. He grunted and fell, thankfully not over the edge, and Altaïr pulled himself up to the roof, crouching low and making his way across, one eye on another archer further across the compound, ready to dive out of view if he turned.

Below him de Montferrat was making his way across the fortress, shouting orders and insults at all who dared be in his vicinity.

Altair came upon the next archer. A knife throw later, the man lay sprawled dead on the roof. Altaïr glanced down at him as he passed, keeping low, seeing the body cease to twitch.

A third archer. Altaïr disposed of him. Now he controlled the roof; he had an escape route for when the deed was done. All that remained was to do it.

Below him, de Montferrat passed through a set of inner gates and Altaïr watched him upbraid the guard for some minor infraction as he did so. Then he was moving into the courtyard of a keep, a kind of inner sanctum for him, perhaps. Altaïr shadowed him from the walkway above. He kept out of sight but nobody looked upwards. They had no need to – or so they thought.

Now de Montferrat took his place behind a table at one side of the courtyard. ‘Men,’ he was saying, ‘gather round. Heed well my words.’

They took positions around him and Altaïr saw that, though they wore the same uniform, they were different from those stationed in the outer curtain. These were more grizzled and looked battle-hardened. If Altaïr was right, they would be de Montferrat’s personal force. He wasn’t going to make the mistake of thinking them ‘little challenge’ again.

In the courtyard, de Montferrat continued, ‘I come from speaking with the King, and the news is grim. We stand accused of failing in our duties. He does not recognize the value of our contributions to the cause.’

‘For shame,’ said one of the men.

‘He knows nothing,’ spat another.

‘Peace. Peace. Hold your tongues,’ admonished de Montferrat. ‘Aye, he speaks falsely, but his words are not without some merit. To tour these grounds, it is easy to find fault. To see imperfection. I fear we have grown slack and lazy.’

Above him, Altaïr allowed himself a smile. The method of his entrance was testament to how slack and lazy de Montferrat’s men had become. And as for his half-asleep archers …

‘Why do you say this?’ asked one of de Montferrat’s men. They bristled, all of them. Altaïr used the sudden eruption of noise as cover to crab to one side, wanting to position himself above his quarry, very, very carefully moving around the courtyard walls. Now he could see what most of the men below did not. From a door at the opposite end of the courtyard more guards had appeared dragging two men. They wore the outfits of Crusaders but were prisoners.

‘I see the way you train,’ de Montferrat was shouting down below. ‘You lack conviction and focus. You gossip and gamble. Tasks set to you are left unfulfilled or poorly performed. This ends today. I will not suffer further degradation at Richard’s hands. Whether or not you see it – and you *should* – this is your fault. You’ve brought shame upon us all. Skill and dedication are what won us Acre. And they will be required to *keep* it. I have been too lenient, it seems. But no more. You will train harder and more often. If this means missing meals, missing sleep – so be it. And should you fail in these tasks, you will learn the true meaning of discipline … Bring them forward.’

Altaïr had reached his position without being spotted. He was close enough now to look down on de Montferrat’s balding head and see the flecks of spittle fly from his mouth as he shouted at his men. If one of those below was to look up for any reason he might be spotted, but all attention was now on the area in front of de Montferrat’s table, where the soldiers had been dragged before him, frightened and shame-faced.

‘If I must make examples of some of you to ensure obedience,’ announced de Montferrat, ‘so be it,’ and he turned to the captives. ‘The two of you stand accused of whoring and drinking while on duty. What say you to these charges?

Through wet mouths they mumbled pleas and apologies.

De Montferrat scowled at them. Then, with a wave of his hand, he ordered their execution.

Their throats were cut and they spent their last moments watching their own blood gush on to the stone of the courtyard. De Montferrat gazed at them, gurgling and flapping on the ground, like dying fish. ‘Disregard for duty is infectious,’ he said, almost sadly. ‘It shall be rooted out and destroyed. In this way, we may prevent its spread. Am I understood?’

‘Yes, my lord,’ came the murmured reply.

‘Good, good,’ he said. ‘Return to your duties, then, filled with a new sense of purpose. Stay strong, stay focused – and we will triumph. Falter, and you *will* join these men. Be sure of it. Dismissed.’

He waved them out of his sight, which cheered Altaïr. Out of sight was where he wanted the men, too. He watched as de Montferrat began sifting through papers on the table, hissing with exasperation, his ill-temper clearly not exhausted. Altaïr crept forward, as close as he dared to the edge of the roof. He saw the two bodies, blood still spreading. Further away, most of the men seemed either to have congregated at the entrance to the keep or were leaving for the outer curtain, no doubt keen to put as much distance between themselves and de Montferrat as possible.

Below him de Montferrat tutted in displeasure, still rattling through the papers, unable to find what he was looking for. He groaned as a wad of them slid from the table to the ground. About to call for assistance he thought better of it and bent to retrieve them. Perhaps he heard the snick of Altaïr’s blade in the split-second between Altaïr leaping from the walkway above and embedding it in his neck.

Then the Assassin was straddling the Acre leader’s body, his hand over his mouth so as not alert others in the courtyard. He had just moments, he knew, whispering, ‘Rest now. Your schemes are at an end.’

‘What do you know of my work?’ croaked de Montferrat.

‘I know that you were going to murder Richard – and claim Acre for your son, Conrad.’

‘For Conrad? My son is an arse, unfit to lead his host, let alone a kingdom. And Richard? He is no better, blinded as he is by faith in the insubstantial. Acre does not belong to either of them.’

‘Then to whom?’

‘The city belongs to its people.’

Altaïr fought the now-familiar sense of his world taking an unexpected lurch. ‘How can you claim to speak for the citizens?’ he said. ‘You stole their food. Disciplined them without mercy. Forced them into service under you.’

‘Everything I did, I did to prepare them for the New World,’ replied de Montferrat, as though such things should be obvious to Altaïr. ‘Stole their food? No. I took possession so that, when the lean times came, it might be rationed properly. Look around. My district is without crime – save that committed by you and your ilk. And as for conscription? They were not being trained to fight. They were being taught the merits of order and discipline. These things are hardly evil.’

‘No matter how noble you believe your intentions, your acts were cruel and cannot continue,’ said Altaïr, though he felt less certain than he sounded.

‘We’ll see how sweet they are,’ said de Montferrat, fading fast, ‘the fruits of *your* labours. You do not free the cities, as you believe, but damn them. And in the end, you’ll have only yourself to blame. You who speak of good intentions …’

But he never finished

‘In death, we are all made equals,’ said Altaïr, staining the feather. He scaled the wall behind him and was on the walkway, darting across to the outer curtain. Then away. As if he had never been there.

19

Altaïr felt weary of the task. Tired and increasingly vexed. Each long ride exhausted him further but he was commanded to visit Al Mualim after every kill. And on each occasion the Master was enigmatic, demanding details from him yet holding so much back.

So it would prove on the next occasion they met. ‘Word has reached me of your success,’ Al Mualim said. ‘You’ve my gratitude – and that of the realm. Freeing these cities from their corrupt leaders will no doubt promote the cause of peace.’

‘Can you really be so sure?’ asked Altaïr. For his own part, he was sure of less and less.

‘The means by which men rule are reflected in their people. As you cleanse the cities of corruption, you heal the hearts and minds of those who live within.’

‘Our enemies would disagree,’ said Altaïr, his mind going to those whose eyes he had closed.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Each man I’ve slain has said strange words to me. They are without regret. Even in death, they seem confident of their success. Though they do not admit it directly, there is a tie that binds them. I am sure of it.’

Al Mualim regarded him carefully. ‘There is a difference, Altaïr, between what we are told to be true and what we *see* to be true. Most men do not bother to make the distinction. It is simpler that way. But as an Assassin, it is your nature to notice. To question.’

‘Then what is it that connects these men?’ pressed Altaïr. The Master had the answers, he was sure of it. All of them.

‘Ah. But as an Assassin it is also your *duty* to still these thoughts and trust in your master. For there can be no true peace without order. And order requires authority.’

Altaïr could not keep the exasperation from his voice. ‘You speak in circles, Master. You commend me for being aware and then ask me not to be. Which is it?’

‘The question will be answered when you no longer need to ask it,’ responded Al Mualim, mysteriously.

Altaïr could see he was getting nowhere. ‘I assume you called me here for more than a lecture,’ he said.

‘Yes,’ said Al Mualim, and directed him to Damascus once more. The one they called Abu’l Nuqoud. He was to be the next to die. First, though, there was the impertinent Bureau leader to negotiate …

‘Altaïr, my friend. Welcome. Welcome. Whose life do you come to collect today?’

Altaïr frowned to see the Damascus Bureau leader, insolent as ever, but not enough so to warrant his fury. It was quite a talent the man had for judging it so well. Perhaps if he had been able to put his skills to better use, he wouldn’t be spending his days behind a desk in the Bureau. One day Altaïr might remind him of that fact. In the meantime, he had work to do. A new target.

‘His name is Abu’l Nuqoud,’ he said. ‘What can you tell me about him?’

‘Oh, the Merchant King of Damascus,’ exclaimed the leader, visibly impressed. ‘Richest man in the city. Quite exciting. Quite dangerous. I envy you, Altaïr. Well … not the bit where you were beaten and stripped of your rank … But I envy everything else. Oh … except for the terrible things the other Assassins say about you. But, yes, aside from the failure and the hatred – yes, aside from those things – I envy you very much …’

Altaïr imagined how his neck would look with a blade sticking from it. ‘I do not care what the others think or say,’ he said. ‘I am here to do a job. So I ask again: what can you tell me about the Merchant King?’

‘Only that he must be a very bad man if Al Mualim has sent you to see him. He keeps to his own kind, wrapped in the finery of this city’s noble district. A busy man – always up to something. I’m sure if you spend some time among his type you’ll learn all you need to know about him.’

Which was exactly what Altaïr did, going to the Omayyad Mosque and Souk Sarouja, as well as Salah Al’din’s citadel, where he learned that Abu’l Nuqoud was hated by the local populace, that he was corrupt and had been embezzling public money, much of which had been diverted to Jerusalem in payments to William de Montferrat. (Altaïr smiled grimly about that.)

Passing the Madrasah al-Kallasah he came upon scholars talking, and hoped he might hear something of Abu’l Nuqoud. They weren’t talking about him but Altaïr hung about anyway, perplexed by their speeches.

‘Citizens. Bring forth your writings,’ the first was saying. ‘Place them in the pile before me. To keep any is a sin. Know and embrace the truth of my words.

Free yourselves from the lies and corruption of the past.'

Although he'd been about to move on, Altaïr continued to linger. There was something about that. *Free yourselves from the lies and corruption of the past.* Could it have something to do with the 'new order' he kept hearing about?

Another scholar was talking now: 'If you truly value peace – if you truly wish to see an end to war – give up your books, your scrolls, your manuscripts, for they feed the flames of ignorance and hate.'

Altaïr had heard enough – and he didn't like what he had heard. *Give up your books.* Why?

He put it out of his mind, however, continuing to learn about the Merchant King. Nuqoud rarely left his chambers, he heard. However, he would that very evening to attend a party he was hosting – held, many said, merely to rub his personal wealth in the noses of the citizenry. He had even ordered wine – in contravention of his faith – for the event. If it was to be anything like his previous parties then that was when Altaïr would strike. He had heard of a scaffold left outside the balcony of Abu'l Nuqoud's quarters. It was, he decided, a perfect time to go to a party.

20

The festivities were already in full swing as Altaïr made his way around the palace courtyard, feeling conspicuous in his robes. They seemed dirty and shabby compared to the outfits of the guests. Most wore finery, their robes intricately embroidered with expensive threads, and unlike the majority of Damascus residents, they looked healthy and well fed, talking loudly over the music, laughing even more loudly. Certainly there was no shortage of refreshments. Servants moved through the guests offering bread, olives and delicacies on golden trays.

Altaïr looked around. The dancers were the only women present: six or seven of them, gyrating slowly to the sounds of *al'ud* and *rebec* played by musicians stationed below a grand balcony. The Assassin's gaze travelled up to where a guard stood with his arms folded, looking out dispassionately over the frivolities. This was Abu'l's perch, decided Altaïr. Indeed, as he watched, the tempo of the music seemed to increase, the *al'ud* all but drowned by heavy drumming that began to excite the partygoers, a sense of anticipation building. The dancing girls were forced into faster movements and were glistening with perspiration below their sheer silk outfits as around them guests raised their hands, cheering the drums on to a crescendo that built and built until the very air seemed to vibrate – and suddenly he was there above them: Abu'l Nuqoud.

Altaïr had overheard lurid descriptions of the man's appearance. Of his corpulence – he was as big as three normal men, they said – the shiny trinkets he always wore, his gaudy robes and bejewelled turban, most of which Altaïr had dismissed as the exaggerations of a resentful populace. But he was agog to discover that the gossip had understated the man. His girth, jewellery and robes were bigger and more garish than anything Altaïr could have imagined. He watched as Nuqoud stood, continuing to chew whatever meal he had been enjoying, grease glistening around his mouth. And as he strode the length of the balcony gazing down on his guests, the skin below his chin undulating as he finished his food, his robe fell open to expose his bare chest, a huge expanse of flesh glistening with sweat.

Suddenly he clapped his hands. The music stopped, conversation ended.

‘Welcome. Welcome,’ he announced. ‘Thank you all for joining me this evening. Please, eat, drink. Enjoy the pleasures I have to offer.’

With that he swept his hand and the fountain in the courtyard’s centre sprang to life, gushing with what Altair first thought was coloured water. Then came an unseemly dash, and he realized what it was: the wine shipment he’d heard about. Here it was. As he watched, two men approached the fountain, dipped their goblets into the foaming liquid, then toasted one another before hurrying off. More guests arrived, dipping their goblets, while servants stood dispensing cups to those who wanted them. It was as if the Merchant King wanted every single one of his guests to sup from the fountain, and he waited until the stampede had receded before continuing.

‘I trust everything is to your satisfaction?’ he asked, with a raised eyebrow.

Indeed it was. Goblets were raised and there was a roar of approval, the guests tongues loosening swiftly under the influence of the wine.

‘Good, good.’ Nuqoud grinned, to reveal bits of food plastered to his teeth. ‘It pleases me to see you so happy. For these are dark days, my friends, and we must enjoy this bounty while we still can.’

Close to Altaïr, the toasting men returned from a second visit to the wine fountain and were gulping from their filled goblets, stifling giggles as Nuqoud continued: ‘War threatens to consume us all. Salah Al’din bravely fights for what he believes in, and you are always there to support him without question. It is your generosity that allows his campaign to continue.’

Altaïr noticed, though he was almost certainly the only one of those in the courtyard to do so, that the galleries along on one side were beginning to fill with guards. He looked closer. Archers.

Nearby the men were still gulping their wine, as Nuqoud began to speak again. ‘So I propose a toast, then,’ he said. ‘To you, my dear friends, who have brought us to where we are today. May you be given everything you deserve.’

‘To your health,’ came the cry, as the partygoers drank freely from their cups.

‘Such kindness,’ Nuqoud was saying above them. ‘I didn’t think it in you. You, who have been so quick to judge me, and so cruelly.’

Sensing a change in him the crowd murmured its confusion.

‘Oh, do not feign ignorance. Do you take me for a fool? That I have not heard the words you whisper behind my back? Well, I have. And I fear I can never forget. But this is not why I called you here tonight. No. I wish to speak more of this war – and your part in it.

‘You give up your coin, quick as can be, knowing all too well it buys the deaths of thousands. You don’t even know *why* we fight. The sanctity of the

Holy Land, you'll say. Or the evil inclination of our enemies. But these are lies you tell yourselves.

'No. All this suffering is born of fear and hate. It bothers you that they are different. Just as it bothers you that I am different.'

Altaïr's gaze went to the archers in the galleries. Feeling a twinge of disquiet he moved to his side to inspect the galleries on the other side of the courtyard. There, too, the bowmen had lined up. He swung round. It was the same behind them. They were not drawing their bows. Not yet, anyway. But, if Altaïr was right, the moment wouldn't be long in coming. And when it did they had the whole courtyard covered. He moved closer to one of the surrounding walls. Not far away, a man began spluttering and coughing, setting his companion off in more fits of laughter.

'Compassion. Mercy. Tolerance,' continued Nuqoud, from the balcony. 'These words mean nothing to any of you. They mean nothing to those infidel invaders who ravage our land in search of gold and glory. And so I say *enough*. I've pledged myself to another cause. One that will bring about a New World – in which all people might live side by side in peace.'

He paused. Altaïr watched the archers tense. They were about to open fire. He pressed himself against the wall. The man was still coughing. He was bent double now, his face red. His companion went from looking concerned to coughing also.

'A pity none of you will live to see it,' finished Nuqoud.

More guests began to splutter. Some were holding their stomachs. Of course, thought Altair. *Poison*. Around him some guests had fallen to their knees. He saw a corpulent man in golden robes frothing, his eyes rolling up in their sockets as he lurched to the ground and lay dying. The archers had readied their bows now. At least half of the partygoers were in the death throes, but there were plenty who had not supped the wine and were scrambling for the exits.

'Kill anyone who tries to escape,' ordered the Merchant King, and his archers opened fire.

Leaving the carnage behind, Altaïr scaled the wall to the balcony and crept up behind Nuqoud. There was a guard at his side, and Altaïr dispatched him with a slash of his blade. The man fell, twisting, his throat opening, spraying blood across the tiles of the balcony. Nuqoud spun to see Altair and his expression changed. Watching the massacre in the party below, he had been smiling, enjoying the show. Now, Altaïr was gratified to see, he felt only fear.

Then pain, as Altaïr sank the blade into his neck above the clavicle.

'Why have you done this?' gasped the huge man, sinking to the smooth stone of his balcony.

‘You stole money from those you claim to lead,’ Altaïr told him. ‘Sent it away for some unknown purpose. I want to know where it’s gone and why.’

Nuqoud scoffed. ‘Look at me. My very nature is an affront to the people I ruled. And these noble robes did little more than muffle their shouts of hate.’

‘So this is about vengeance, then?’ asked Altaïr.

‘No. Not vengeance, but my conscience. How could I finance a war in service to the same God that calls me an abomination?’

‘If you do not serve Salah Al’din’s cause, then whose?’

Nuqoud smiled. ‘In time you’ll come to know them. I think, perhaps, you already do.’

Puzzled once again, Altaïr asked, ‘Then why hide? And why these dark deeds?’

‘Is it so different from your own work? You take the lives of men and women, strong in the conviction that their deaths will improve the lot of those left behind. A minor evil for a greater good? We are the same.’

‘No.’ Altaïr shook his head. ‘We are nothing alike.’

‘Ah … but I see it in your eyes. You doubt.’

The stink of death was on his breath as he pulled Altaïr closer to him. ‘You cannot stop us,’ he managed. ‘We will have our New World …’

He died, a thin trail of blood trickling from his mouth.

‘Enjoy the silence,’ said Altaïr, and dipped his feather into the Merchant King’s blood.

He needed to see Al Mualim, he decided. The time for uncertainty was over.

21

‘Come, Altaïr. I would have news of your progress,’ said Al Mualim.

‘I’ve done as you’ve asked,’ replied the Assassin.

‘Good. Good.’ Al Mualim looked hard him. ‘I sense your thoughts are elsewhere. Speak your mind.’

It was true. Altaïr had thought of little else on the return journey. Now he had the opportunity to get it off his mind. ‘Each man I’m sent to kill speaks cryptic words to me. Each time I come to you and ask for answers. Each time you give only riddles in exchange. But no more.’

Al Mualim’s eyebrows shot up in surprise – surprise that Altaïr should address him in such a way. ‘Who are you to say “no more”?’

Altaïr swallowed, then set his jaw. ‘I’m the one who does the killing. If you want it to continue, you’ll speak straight with me for once.’

‘Tread carefully, Altaïr. I do not like your tone.’

‘And I do not like your deception,’ replied Altaïr, more loudly than he had intended.

Al Mualim darkened. ‘I have offered you a chance to restore your lost honour.’

‘Not lost,’ countered Altaïr. ‘Taken. By you. And then you sent me to fetch it again, like some damned dog.’

Now the Master drew his sword, eyes flaring. ‘It seems I’ll need to find another. A shame. You showed great potential.’

‘I think if you had another, you’d have sent him long ago,’ said Altaïr, who wondered if he was pushing his mentor too far, but carried on anyway. ‘You said the answer to my question would arise when I no longer needed to ask it. So I will not ask. I *demand* you tell me what binds these men.’

He stood prepared to feel the point of Al Mualim’s sword, hoping only that the Master considered him too valuable. It was a gamble, he knew.

Al Mualim seemed to consider the options also, his sword wavering, light glancing off the blade. Then he sheathed it and seemed to relax a little.

‘What you say is true,’ he said at last. ‘These men are connected … by a blood oath not unlike our own.’

‘Who are they?’

‘*Non nobis, Domine, non nobis,*’ he said. *Not unto us, O Lord.*

‘Templars …’ said Altaïr. Of course.

‘Now you see the true reach of Robert de Sable.’

‘All of these men – leaders of cities – commanders of armies …’

‘All pledge allegiance to his cause.’

‘Their works are not meant to be viewed on their own, are they?’ said Altaïr, thinking. ‘But as a whole … What do they desire?’

‘Conquest,’ replied Al Mualim, simply. ‘They seek the Holy Land – not in the name of God but for themselves.’

‘What of Richard? Salah Al’din?’

‘Any who oppose the Templars will be destroyed. Be assured they have the means to accomplish it.’

‘Then they must be stopped,’ said Altaïr, with resolve. He felt as though a great weight had lifted from him.

‘That is why we do our work, Altaïr. To ensure a future free of such men.’

‘Why did you hide the truth from me?’ he asked the Master.

‘That you might pierce the veil yourself. Like any task, knowledge precedes action. Information learned is more valuable than information given. Besides … your behaviour had not inspired in me much confidence.’

‘I see.’ Altair lowered his head.

‘Altaïr, your mission has not changed, merely the context within which you perceive it.’

‘And armed with this knowledge, I might better understand those Templars who remain.’

Al Mualim nodded. ‘Is there anything else you want to know?’

Altaïr had solved the mystery of the Brotherhood to which his targets had referred. But there was something else … ‘What about the treasure Malik retrieved from Solomon’s Temple?’ he asked. ‘Robert seemed desperate to have it back.’

‘In time, Altaïr, all will become clear,’ said Al Mualim. ‘Just as the role of the Templars has revealed itself to you, so too will the nature of their treasure. For now, take comfort in the fact that it is not in their hands, but ours.’

For a moment Altaïr considered pressing him on the subject but decided against it. He had been lucky once. He doubted it would happen a second time. ‘If this is your desire …’ he said.

‘It is.’

The atmosphere in the room relaxed as Altaïr turned to go. His next destination was Jerusalem.

‘Altaïr – before you go?’
‘Yes?’
‘How did you know I wouldn’t kill you?’
‘Truth be told, Master, I didn’t.’

22

Stupid Altaïr. Arrogant Altaïr. He was in trouble. Majd Addin lay dead at his feet, the wood slowly staining with his blood. At his back were the accused, lashed to stakes and hanging from them, limp and bloody. The square was emptying of spectators, but not of Majd Addin's guards, who were advancing on him. Approaching the platform. Beginning to climb the steps at either end while blocking him from jumping at the front. With fierce eyes they were slowly hemming him in, their swords raised, and if they felt fear it didn't show. That their leader had been publicly cut down by an Assassin at Jerusalem's Wailing Wall gallows had not thrown them into panic and disarray as Altaïr had hoped. It hadn't instilled in them a mortal fear of the Assassin who now stood before them, his blade dripping with Addin's blood. It had given them resolve and a need to exact revenge.

Which meant that things hadn't gone according to plan.

Except … the first of the guards darted forward, snarling, his job to test Altaïr's mettle. The Assassin retreated, parrying the strikes of the Saracen's blade, steel ringing in the near-empty square. The guard pressed forward. Altaïr glanced behind to see others advancing and replied with an attack of his own, forcing the Saracen back. *One, two, thrust*. Forced hurriedly to defend, the guard tried to skip away, almost backing into one of the bodies hanging from the stakes. Altaïr glanced down and saw his chance, coming forward once again, launching a wild attack aimed at panicking his opponent. Blade met blade and, sure enough, the Saracen was forced messily backwards and into the pool of blood on the platform – just as Altaïr had intended. He slipped, his footing lost, and for a second his guard was down – enough time for Altaïr to dart inside his sword arm, impaling him in the chest. He gurgled. Died. His body slipped to the wood, and Altaïr straightened to face more attackers, seeing doubt and maybe a little fear in their eyes now. The Assassin's mettle had been duly tested and he had not been found lacking.

Still, though, the guards had the advantage of numbers, and more, surely, would be on their way, alerted by the commotion. News of events at the square would have spread throughout Jerusalem: that the city regent had been slain on

his own execution scaffold; that his guards had set upon the Assassin responsible. Altaïr thought of Malik's glee at the news.

Yet Malik had appeared changed when Altaïr had last visited the Bureau. It wasn't as though he'd welcomed Altaïr with open arms but, nevertheless, open hostility had been replaced by a certain weariness, and he had regarded Altaïr with a frown, not a glare.

'Why do you trouble me today?' He'd sighed.

Grateful not to have to spar, Altaïr had told him his target: Majd Addin.

Malik nodded. 'Salah Al'din's absence has left the city without a proper leader, and Majd Addin has appointed himself to play the part. Fear and intimidation get him what he wants. He has no true claim to the position.'

'That ends today,' Altaïr had said.

'You speak too readily. This is not some slaver we're discussing. He rules Jerusalem and is well protected because of it. I suggest you plan your attack carefully. Get to know your prey.'

'That I already have,' Altaïr had assured him. 'Majd Addin is holding a public execution not far from here. It's sure to be well guarded, but nothing I can't handle. I know what to do.'

Malik sneered. 'And that is why you remain a novice in my eyes. You cannot *know* anything. Only suspect. You must expect to be wrong. To have overlooked something. Anticipate, Altaïr. How many times must I remind you of this?'

'As you wish. Are we done?'

'Not quite. There is one more thing. One of the men to be executed is a brother. One of us. Al Mualim wishes him to be saved. Do not worry about the actual rescue – my men will take care of that. But you must ensure Majd Addin does not take his life.'

'I won't give him the chance.'

As he'd left, Malik had warned him, 'Don't foul this, Altaïr,' and Altaïr had mentally scoffed at the thought as he began the walk to the Wailing Wall.

23

As he had approached the Wailing Wall, Altaïr had seen crowds beginning to gather: men, women, children, dogs, even livestock. All were making their way through the surrounding streets of the square towards the execution plaza.

Altaïr joined them, and as he passed along a street that was filling with more and more eager spectators heading in the same direction, he had listened to a town crier whipping up enthusiasm for the coming attraction – though it hardly seemed necessary.

'Take notice,' called the crier. 'Majd Addin, most beloved regent of Jerusalem, will attend a public execution at the western edge of Solomon's Temple. All able citizens are requested to be there. Hurry! Come and witness what becomes of our enemies.'

Altaïr had had an idea of what that might be. He hoped he would be able to change the outcome.

Guards at the entrance to the square were trying to control the flow of the crowd inside, turning some back, allowing others in. Altaïr hung back, watching the masses eddy about the entrance, bodies pressing against him in the street. Children darted through the legs of the spectators, sneaking their way into the plaza. Next he saw a knot of scholars, the crowd parting to make way for them, even dogs seeming to sense the reverence reserved for the holy men. Altaïr rearranged his robes, adjusted his cowl, waited until the scholars were passing and slipped in among them. As he did so, he felt a hand tugging at his sleeve and looked down to see a grubby child staring at him with quizzical eyes. He snarled and, terrified, the boy darted away.

Just in time: they had reached the gates, where the guards parted to allow the scholars through, and Altaïr came upon the square.

There were rough stone walls on all sides. Along the far end was a raised platform and on it a series of stakes. Empty, for now, but not for much longer. Jerusalem's regent, Majd Addin was walking out on to the stage. At his appearance there was a surge, and a shout went up from the entrance as the guards lost control and citizens came pouring in. Altaïr was carried forward on the wave, now much closer to the rostrum and to the feared Majd Addin, who

was already stalking the stage, waiting for the square to fill. He wore a white turban and a long, ornately embroidered gown. He moved as though he was angry. As though his temper was just moments from escaping his body.

It was.

'*Silence!* I demand *silence*,' he roared.

With the show about to start, there was a final surge and Altair was carried forward once more. He saw guards stationed by the steps on either side of the platform, two at each end. In front of the platform he saw more, to prevent the crowd scrambling on to the scaffold. Craning his neck, he spotted others around the periphery of the square. At least the latter would find it difficult to move through the crowd, but that still gave just seconds for the kill *and* to fend off the nearest guards – the four at either end of the platform at the very least. Maybe those standing guard on the ground as well.

Could he better them all in that time? Ten or so loyal Saracens? The Altaïr who had attacked Robert de Sable on the Temple Mount would have had no doubts at all. Now, though, he was more wary. And he knew that to attempt the killing immediately was madness. A plan doomed to failure.

Just as he'd made up his mind to wait, the four prisoners were led on to the scaffold and to the stakes where the guards began binding them in place. At one end there was a woman, dirty-faced and weeping. Beside her stood two men, dressed in rags. And finally the Assassin, his head lolling, beaten, obviously. The crowd hissed its displeasure

'People of Jerusalem, hear me well,' shouted Majd Addin, his voice silencing the crowd, which had become excited at the arrival of the prisoners. 'I stand here today to deliver a warning.' He paused. 'There are malcontents among you. They sow the seeds of discontent, hoping to lead you astray.'

The crowd murmured, seething around Altaïr.

Addin continued: 'Tell me, is this what you desire? To be mired in deceit and sin? To live your lives in fear?'

'We do not,' screamed a spectator from behind Altaïr. But Altaïr's attention was fixed on the Assassin, a fellow member of the Order. As he watched, a bloody string of saliva dripped from the man's mouth to the wood. He tried to raise his head and Altaïr caught a glimpse of his face. Ripe purple bruises. Then his head lolled once more.

Majd Addin grinned a crooked grin. His was a face not used to smiling. 'So you wish to take action?' he asked agreeably.

The crowd roared its approval. They were here to see blood; they knew the regent would not leave their thirst unquenched.

'Guide us,' called a voice, as the roar died down.

‘Your devotion pleases me,’ said Addin, and he turned to the prisoners, indicating them with a sweep of his arm. ‘This evil must be purged. Only then can we hope to be redeemed.’

Suddenly there was a disturbance in front of the platform, a voice crying, ‘This is not justice.’

Altaïr saw a man in rags. He was shouting at Majd Addin: ‘You twist the words of the Prophet, peace be upon him.’

He had a companion, also clothed in tatters, who was similarly upbraiding the crowd. ‘And all of you stand idle, complicit in this crime.’

Altaïr used the disturbance to edge closer. He needed to climb to the platform at the end where the Assassin stood bound to the stake. Couldn’t risk having him used as a barrier or hostage.

‘God curse you all,’ shouted the first man – but they had no supporters. Not among the crowd and certainly not among the guards, who even now were moving forward. Seeing them come, the two hecklers made a run for it, producing daggers and waving them as they made a futile dash towards the platform. One was cut down by an archer. The second found himself pursued by two guards, failing to see a third Saracen who opened his stomach with his sword.

They lay dying in the dust and Majd Addin pointed at them. ‘See how the evil of one man spreads to corrupt another?’ he shrieked. His black beard quivered with outrage. ‘They sought to instil fear and doubt within you. But *I* will keep you safe.’

Now he turned back to the poor unfortunates – who must surely have been praying for the attempt on his life to succeed, but instead watched wide-eyed and terrified as he drew his sword.

‘Here are four filled with sin,’ called Addin, pointing first at the woman, then at each one in turn. ‘The harlot. The thief. The gambler. The heretic. Let God’s judgment be brought down upon them all.’

The heretic. That was the Assassin. Altaïr steeled himself and began to move closer to the steps at the side of the platform, one eye on Addin as he walked first over to the woman. The prostitute. Unable to take her eyes off the sword Addin held – almost casually, hanging at his side – she began wailing uncontrollably.

‘*Temptress!*’ roared Addin, over her sobs. ‘Succubus. Whore. She goes by many names, but her sin remains the same. She turned her back on the teachings of our Prophet, peace be upon him. Defiled her body to advance her station. Each man she touched is for ever stained.’

In response the crowd booed. Altaïr moved a few more feet towards the rostrum steps. He watched the guards and saw that their attention was on Addin. Good.

'Punish her,' screamed an onlooker.

Addin had whipped them into a state of righteous fury.

'She must pay,' agreed another.

The woman stopped snivelling to shout at the crowd baying for her blood. 'This man speaks *lies*. I am here today not because I lay down with other men, for I did not. He means to murder me because I would not *lie down with him*.'

Majd Addin's eyes flared. 'Even now, offered redemption, she continues to deceive. She rejects salvation. There is only one way to deal with this.'

She had time to scream, '*No,*' as his sword flashed and he drove it into her stomach. In the moment of silence that followed there was the sound of her blood splashing to the boards of the platform, before a collective 'ooh' went up from the crowd, which shifted as those at the sides and back tried to get a better view of the gutted woman.

Altaïr was closer to the steps now but the sudden movement of the crowd had left him a little exposed. Relieved, he watched as Addin strode to the next whimpering prisoner and the spectators rolled back again, anticipating the next kill.

Addin indicated the man, a gambler, he explained. A man who could not abstain from intoxicants and wagers.

'For shame,' screeched the crowd. It was they who were intoxicated, thought Altaïr, sickened by their bloodlust.

'A game of chance condemns me to death?' cried the gambler, one last throw of the dice for him. 'Show me where such a thing is written. It is not sin that corrupts our city, but *you*.'

'So you would say to the people it is acceptable to defy the will of our Prophet, peace be upon him?' countered Addin. 'And if we are to ignore this teaching, then what of the others? Where does it end? I say it ends in chaos. And so it cannot be allowed.'

His blade glinted in the afternoon sun. He drove it deep into the belly of the gambler, grunting as he yanked it upwards, opening a vertical wound in the man's abdomen and exposing his entrails. Delighted, the crowd screamed in mock disgust, already seething to the side in order to view the next killing, taking Altaïr closer to the steps.

Addin sauntered to the third prisoner, shaking blood from his blade. 'This man,' he said, indicating the trembling captive, 'took what was not his. Money

earned through the labour of another. It could have belonged to any of you. And so you have all been violated. What say you to this?'

'It was a single dinar,' the accused appealed, imploring the crowd for mercy, 'found on the ground. He speaks as though I trespassed, as though I ripped it from the hands of another.'

But the throng was not in a merciful frame of mind. There were calls for his blood, the spectators in a frenzy now.

'Today a dinar,' shrieked Addin, 'tomorrow a horse. The next day, another man's life. The object itself is not of consequence. What matters is that you took what did not belong to you. Were I to allow such behaviour, then others would believe it their right to take as well. Where would it end?'

He moved in front of the thief, whose final pleas were cut short as Addin buried the blade in his belly.

Now he would turn his attention to the Assassin. Altaïr had to act fast. He had just moments. Lowering his head, he began to shoulder his way through the crowd, careful not to appear as though he had any particular intention. Simply that he wanted to get as close to the front of the crowd as possible. By now, Majd Addin had reached the Assassin and sauntered up to him, grabbed his hair and raised his head to show the crowd.

'This man spreads vicious lies and propaganda,' he roared venomously. 'He has only murder on his mind. He poisons our thoughts as he poisons his blade. Turns brother against brother. Father against son. More dangerous than any enemy we face. He is *Assassin*.'

He was rewarded with the crowd's collective intake of breath. Altaïr had reached the steps now. Around him the throng seethed, excitable spectators screaming for the killing blow.

'Destroy the unbeliever!'

'Kill him!'

'Slit his throat!'

The Assassin, his head still held by Addin, spoke: 'Killing me will not make you any safer. I see the fear in your eyes, hear the quiver in your throats. You are afraid. Afraid because you know our message cannot be silenced. Because you know we cannot be stopped.'

Altaïr was at the bottom of the steps. He stood there as if attempting to get a better view. Others had seen him and were doing the same. The two guards had been standing at the top entranced by the action, but slowly became aware of what was happening. One called to the other and they stepped down and began commanding citizens to leave, even as more spectators were pouring up the stairs. All wanted to get as close as possible to the execution and were jostling

and shoving, some forced off the steps, including one of the furious guards. Altaïr used the disorder to climb higher until he stood just a few feet away from Addin, who had released the Assassin's head and was preaching to the crowd of his 'blasphemy'. His 'treachery'.

Behind Altaïr the scuffle continued. The two guards were fully occupied. Ahead of him, Addin had finished addressing the crowd, who were suitably whipped up and desperate to see the final kill. Now he turned back to the prisoner, brandishing his sword, its blade already stained red, and moved towards him for the death blow.

Then, as though alerted by some higher sense, he stopped, turned his head and looked straight at Altaïr.

For a moment it was as though the square contracted, as though the disorderly crowd, the guards, the condemned man and the corpses were no longer there. And as they regarded one another Altaïr saw realisation dawn on Addin that death was near. Then Altaïr flicked his ring finger and the blade sprang forth as he launched himself forward, drawing it back, and sinking it into Addin, the entire movement lasting little longer than the blink of an eye.

The crowd roared and screamed, not knowing what to make of the sudden turn of events. Addin bucked and squirmed, blood pumping from the wound in his neck but Altaïr held him steady with his knees, raising his blade.

'Your work here is finished,' he told Addin, and tensed, about to deliver the final blow. Around them there was pandemonium. The guards were only just realizing what was wrong and trying to fight their way to the platform through a panicked crowd. Altaïr needed to finish this, fast. But he wanted to hear what Addin had to say.

'No. No. It had only just begun,' said Addin.

'Tell me, what is your part in all of this? Do you intend to defend yourself as the others have and explain away your evil deeds?'

'The Brotherhood wanted the city. I wanted power. There was … an opportunity.'

'An opportunity to murder innocents,' said Altaïr. He could hear the sound of running feet. The people fleeing the square.

'Not so innocent. Dissident voices cut deep as steel. They disrupt order. In this, I agree with the Brotherhood.'

'You'd kill people simply for believing differently from you?'

'Of course not … I killed them because I could. Because it was fun. Do you know what it feels like to determine another man's fate? And did you see the way the people cheered? The way they feared me? I was like a god. You'd have done the same if you could. Such … power.'

‘Once, perhaps. But then I learned what becomes of those who lift themselves above others.’

‘And what is that?’

‘Here. Let me show you.’

He finished Addin, then closed the tyrant’s eyes. Stained the feather.

‘Every soul shall taste death,’ he said.

And then he had stood up to face the guards – just as a bell began tolling.

A Saracen came flying at him and he parried, grunting, driving the man back. More were scrambling on to the platform, and he found himself facing three at once. One fell screaming beneath his blade, another lost his footing on the slick of blood, fell, and Altaïr finished him. Seeing a gap, the Assassin jumped from the scaffold, activating his blade and spearing a guard as he landed, the man’s sword swiping at thin air.

On the square now he saw his only escape and fended off two more attackers as he edged towards the entranceway. He took a nick and felt warm blood sluice down his arm; then, grasping hold of a swordsman, launched him into the path of the second. Both tumbled, yelling, to the dirt. Altaïr darted towards the doorway, arriving as a trio of soldiers came hurrying through. He had the surprise though, impaling one with his sword, slashing the neck of a second with his blade and shoving the two writhing, dying men into the third.

Entrance clear, he glanced behind at the platform to see Malik’s men freeing the Assassin and leading him away, then dashed out into the lane where a fourth guard waited, coming forward with a pike, screaming. Altaïr jumped clear, grasping the edge of a wooden frame and flipping himself up on to the canopy, feeling his muscles sing. From below there was a shout of frustration, and as he scrabbled up to the rooftop he glanced down to see a cluster of soldiers following him. To give them pause he killed one with a throwing knife, then dashed off across the rooftops, waited until the bell had stopped ringing, and then disappeared into the crowd, listening as word spread throughout the city: an Assassin had killed the regent.

24

There was still something Altaïr needed to know, though.

And with the last of the city regents dead, now was the time to ask it. He steeled himself as he was ushered once more into Al Mualim's chambers.

'Come in, Altaïr. I trust you are well rested? Ready for your remaining trials?' said the Master.

'I am. But I'd speak with you first. I have questions …'

Al Mualim indicated his disapproval by raising his chin and pursing his lips slightly. No doubt he remembered the last occasion when Altaïr had pressed for answers. So did Altaïr, who had decided to tread more carefully this time, keen not to see a reappearance of the Master's blade.

'Ask, then,' said Al Mualim. 'I'll do my best to answer.'

Altaïr took a deep breath. 'The Merchant King of Damascus murdered the nobles who ruled his city. Majd Addin in Jerusalem used fear to force his people into submission. I suspect William meant to murder Richard, and hold Acre with his troops. These men were meant to aid their leaders. Instead they chose to betray them. What I do not understand is *why*.'

'Is the answer not obvious? The Templars desire control. Each man – as you've noted – wanted to claim their cities in the Templar name that the Templars themselves might rule the Holy Land and eventually beyond. But they cannot succeed in their mission.'

'Why is that?' asked Altaïr.

'Their plans depend upon the Templar Treasure … the Piece of Eden … But we hold it now. And they cannot hope to achieve their goals without it.'

Of course, thought Altaïr. This was the item so many of his targets had referred to.

'What is this treasure?' he said.

Al Mualim smiled, then went to the rear of his chamber, bent and opened a chest. He took a box from it, returned to his desk and placed it down. Altair knew what it was without looking, but still found his gaze drawn to it – no, *dragged* to it. It was the box Malik had retrieved from the Temple, and as before it seemed to glow, to radiate a kind of power. He had known all along, he

realized, that this was the treasure they spoke of. His eyes went from the box to Al Mualim, who had been watching his reaction. The Master's face bore an indulgent expression, as though he had seen many behave in this way. And that this was only the beginning.

For now he reached into the box and took from it a globe, about the size of two fists: a golden globe with a mosaic design that seemed to pulse with energy, so that Altaïr found himself wondering if his eyes were deceiving him. If maybe it was … *alive* in some way. But he was distracted. Instead he felt the globe pulling at him.

'It is … temptation,' intoned Al Mualim.

And suddenly, like a candle snuffed out, the globe stopped pulsing. Its aura was gone. Its draw suddenly non-existent. It was … just a globe again: an ancient thing, beautiful in its own way but, still, a mere trinket.

'It's just a piece of silver …' said Altaïr.

'Look at it,' insisted Al Mualim.

'It shimmers for the briefest moment, but there's really nothing spectacular about it,' said Altaïr. 'What am I supposed to see?'

'This "piece of silver" cast out Adam and Eve. *This is the Apple.* It turned staves into snakes. Parted and closed the Red Sea. Eris used it to start the Trojan War. And with it, a poor carpenter turned water into wine.'

The Apple, the Piece of Eden? Altaïr looked at it doubtfully. 'It seems rather plain for all the power you claim it has,' he said. 'How does it work?'

'He who holds it commands the hearts and minds of whoever looks upon it – whoever "tastes" of it, as they say.'

'Then de Naplouse's men …' said Altaïr, thinking of the poor creatures in the hospital.

'An experiment. Herbs used to simulate its effects … To be ready for when they held it.'

Altaïr saw it now. 'Talal supplied them. Tamir equipped them. They were preparing for something … But what?'

'War,' said Al Mualim, starkly.

'And the others … the men who ruled the cities … They meant to gather up their people. Make them like de Naplouse's men.'

'The perfect citizens. The perfect soldiers. A perfect world.'

'Robert de Sable must never have this back,' said Altaïr.

'So long as he and his brothers live, they will try,' said Al Mualim.

'Then they must be destroyed.'

'Which is what I've had you doing,' smiled Al Mualim. 'There are two more Templars who require your attention,' he said. 'One in Acre, known as Sibrand.

One in Damascus, called Jubair. Visit the Bureau leaders. They'll instruct you further.'

'As you wish,' said Altaïr, bowing his head.

'Be quick about it,' said Al Mualim. 'No doubt Robert de Sable is made nervous by our continued success. His remaining followers will do their best to expose you. They *know* you come: the man in the white hood. They'll be looking for you.'

'They won't find me. I'm but a blade in a crowd,' said Altaïr.

Al Mualim smiled, proud once more of his pupil.

25

It was Al Mualim who had taught them the Creed, the young Altaïr and Abbas. The Master had filled their young heads with the tenets of the Order.

Every day, after a breakfast of flat bread and dates, stern governesses had seen to it that they were washed and neatly dressed. Then, with books clasped to their breasts, they had hurried along corridors, their sandals slapping on the stone, chatting excitedly, until they reached the door to the Master's study.

Here they had had a ritual. Both passed a hand over his own mouth to go from happy face to serious face, the face the Master expected. Then one would knock. For some reason they both liked to knock, so they took it in turns each day. Then they would wait for the Master to invite them in. There, they would sit cross-legged on cushions that Al Mualim had provided especially for them – one for Altaïr, and one for his brother, Abbas.

When they first began their tutelage they had been frightened and unsure, of themselves, of each other and in particular of Al Mualim, who would tutor them in the morning and at evening, with training in the yard in the afternoon and then again at night. Long hours spent learning the ways of the Order, watching the Master pace the study, his hands behind his back, occasionally stopping to admonish them if he thought they weren't paying attention. They both found Al Mualim's one eye disconcerting and felt fixed in place by it sometimes. Until one night Abbas had whispered across their room, 'Hey, Altaïr?'

Altair turned to him, surprised. Neither had done this before, begun talking after the lights had been snuffed. They had lain in silence, each lost in his own thoughts. Until that night. The moon was full and the sheet at their window glowed white, lighting the room a soft, grey hue. Abbas was lying on his side looking across at Altaïr, and when he had the other boy's attention he placed a hand over one eye, and said, in an almost perfect approximation of Al Mualim, 'We are nothing if we do not abide by the Assassin's Creed.'

Altaïr had dissolved into giggles and from then the two were friends. From now on when Al Mualim admonished them, it was for the stifled laughter he heard when his back was turned. Suddenly the governesses found that their charges weren't quite so meek and acquiescent.

And Al Mualim taught them the tenets. The tenets that Altaïr would neglect later in life, at a cost dear to him. Al Mualim told them that the Assassins were not indiscriminate killers, not as the world at large liked to think, but were tasked only with slaying the evil and corrupt; their mission was to bring peace and stability to the Holy Land, to instil in it a code not of violence and conflict but of thought and contemplation.

He taught them to master their feelings and emotions, to cloak their disposition and be absorbed by the world about them, so that they might move among normal people undetected, a blank space, a ghost in the crowd. To the people, the Assassin must be a kind of magic they did not understand, he said, but that, like all magic, it was reality bent to the will of the Assassin.

He taught them to protect the Order at all times; that the Brotherhood was ‘more important than you, Altaïr. It is more important than you, Abbas. It is more important than Masyaf and myself.’ Thus, the action of one Assassin should never call harm up upon the Order. The Assassin should never compromise the Brotherhood.

And though Altaïr would one day disregard this doctrine, too, it was not for want of Al Mualim’s tutoring. He taught them that men had created boundaries and declared all within those boundaries to be ‘true’ and ‘real’, but in fact they were false perimeters, imposed by those who would presume to be leaders. He showed them that the bounds of reality were infinitely broader than mankind’s limited imagination was able to conceive, and that only the few could see beyond those boundaries – only a few dared even question their existence.

And they were the Assassins.

And because the Assassins were able to see the world as it truly was, then to the Assassin everything was possible – everything was permitted.

Every day, as Altaïr and Abbas learned more and more about the Order, they also grew closer. They spent almost all day with one another. Whatever Al Mualim taught them, their own day-to-day reality was in fact insubstantial. It consisted of each other, the governesses, Al Mualim’s classes and a succession of combat trainers, each with a different speciality. And far from everything being permitted, virtually nothing was. Any entertainment was provided by the boys themselves, and so they spent long hours talking when they should have been studying. A subject they rarely discussed was their fathers. At first Abbas had talked only of Ahmad returning one day to Masyaf, but as the months turned into years he spoke of it less. Altaïr would see him standing at the window, watching over the valley with glittering eyes. Then his friend began to withdraw and become less communicative. He was not so quick to smile any more. Where before he had spent hours talking, now he stood at the window instead.

Altaïr thought: If only he knew. Abbas's grief would flare and intensify, then settle into an ache, just as Altaïr had experienced. The fact of his father's death hurt him every day, but at least he *knew*. It was the difference between a dull ache and a constant sense of hopelessness.

So one night, after the candles had been snuffed out, he told Abbas. With bowed head, fighting back the tears, he told Abbas that Ahmad had come to his quarters and there he had taken his own life, but that Al Mualim had decided it best to hide this fact from the Brotherhood, 'in order to protect you. But the Master hasn't witnessed your yearning at first hand. I lost my father, too, so I know. I know that the pain of it recedes over time. By telling you, I hope to help you, my friend.'

Abbas had simply blinked in the darkness, then turned over in his bed. Altaïr had wondered how he had expected Abbas to react. Tears? Anger? Disbelief? He had been prepared for them all. Even to bar Abbas in and prevent him going to the Master. What he hadn't expected was this … emptiness. This silence.

26

Altaïr stood on a rooftop in Damascus, looking down on his next target.

The smell of burning sickened him. The sight too. Of books being burned. Altaïr watched them crinkle, blacken and burn, thinking of his father, who would have been disgusted; Al Mualim, too, when he told him. To burn books was an affront to the Assassin way. Learning is knowledge, and knowledge is freedom and power. He knew that. He had forgotten it, somehow, but he knew it once more.

He stood out of sight on the ledge of the roof overlooking the courtyard of Jubair's *madrasah* in Damascus. Smoke rose towards where he stood but all of the attention below was focused on the fire, piles of books, documents and scrolls at its centre. The fire and Jubair al-Hakim, who stood nearby, barking orders. All were doing his bidding apart from one, Altaïr noticed. This scholar stood to the side, gazing into the fire, his expression echoing Altaïr's thoughts.

Jubair wore leather boots, a black headcloth and a permanent scowl. Altaïr watched him carefully: he had learned much about him. Jubair was the chief scholar of Damascus but in name only, for it was a most unusual scholar who insisted not on spreading learning but on destroying it. In this pursuit he had enlisted the city's academics, whose presence was encouraged by Salah Al'din.

And why were they doing it, collecting then destroying these documents? In the name of some 'new way' or 'new order', which Altaïr had heard about before. Exactly what it involved wasn't clear. He knew *who* was behind it, though. The Templars, his quarry being one of them.

'Every single text in this city must be destroyed.' Below him Jubair was exhorting his men with a fanatic's zeal. His scholar helpers scurried about, laden with armfuls of papers that they had carried from somewhere hidden from Altaïr. They were casting them into the flames, which bloomed and grew with each fresh delivery. From the corner of his eye he saw the distant scholar becoming more and more agitated, until suddenly, as though he could no longer contain himself, he sprang forward to confront Jubair.

'My friend, you must not do this,' he said, his jovial tone belying his obvious distress. 'Much knowledge rests within these parchments, put there by our

ancestors for good reason.'

Jubair stopped, to stare at him with naked contempt. 'And what *reason* is this?' he snarled.

'They are beacons meant to guide us – to save us from the darkness that is ignorance,' implored the scholar. The flames danced tall at his back. Scholars came with more armfuls of books that they deposited on the fire, some casting nervous glances at where Jubair and the protester stood.

'No.' Jubair took a step forward, forcing the naysayer to retreat a step. 'These bits of paper are covered with lies. They poison your minds. And so long as they exist, you cannot hope to see the world as it truly is.'

Trying desperately to be reasonable, the scholar still couldn't hide his frustration. 'How can you accuse these scrolls of being weapons? They're tools of learning.'

'You turn to them for answers and salvation.' Jubair took another step forward, the protester another step back. 'You rely more upon them than upon yourselves. This makes you weak and stupid. You trust in words. Drops of ink. Do you ever stop to think of who put them there? Or why? No. You simply accept their words without question. And what if those words speak falsely, as they often do? This is dangerous.'

The scholar looked confused. As though someone was telling him black was white, night was day. 'You are wrong,' he insisted. 'These texts offer the gift of knowledge. We need them.'

Jubair darkened. 'You love your precious writings? You'd do anything for them?'

'Yes, yes. Of course.'

Jubair smiled. A cruel smile. 'Then join them.'

Planting both hands on the scholar's chest, Jubair shoved him backwards, hard. For a second the scholar was mid-topple, his eyes wide open in surprise and his arms flapping madly, as though he hoped to fly clear of the greedy fire. Then he was claimed by the impetus of the shove, falling into the flames, writhing on a bed of searing heat. He screamed and kicked. His robe caught. For a moment he seemed to be trying to beat out the flames, the sleeves of his tunic already alight. Then his shrieks stopped. And contained in the smoke rising to Altaïr was the nauseating scent of roasting human flesh. He covered his nose. In the courtyard below, the scholars did the same.

Jubair addressed them: 'Any man who speaks as he did is just as much a threat. Does any other among you wish to challenge me?'

There was no reply, fearful eyes looked over hands held to noses. 'Good,' said Jubair. 'Your orders are simple enough. Go out into the city. Collect any

remaining writings and add them to the piles in the streets. When you're done we'll send a cart to collect them that they may be destroyed.'

The scholars left. And now the courtyard was empty. A beautiful marbled area for ever tarnished by the obscenity of the fire. Jubair paced around it, gazing into the fire. Every so often he cast a nervous glance around him, and appeared to be listening carefully. But if he heard anything it was the crackle of the fire and the sound of his own breathing. He relaxed a little, which made Altaïr smile. Jubair knew the Assassins were coming for him. Thinking himself cleverer than his executioners he'd sent decoys into the city streets – decoys with his most trusted bodyguards, so that the deception should be complete. Altaïr moved silently around the rooftop until he stood directly above the book-burner. Jubair thought he was safe here, locked in his *madrasah*.

But he wasn't. And he had executed his last underling, burned his last book.

Snick.

Jubair looked up and saw the Assassin descending towards him, blade outstretched. Too late, he tried to dart out of the way as the blade was sinking into his neck. With a sigh he crumpled to the marble.

His eyelids fluttered. 'Why … why have you done this?'

Altaïr looked over to the blackened corpse of the scholar in the fire. With the flesh burned away from his skull, it was as though he was grinning. 'Men must be free to do as they believe,' he told Jubair. He withdrew the blade from the other's neck. Blood dripped to the marble. 'It is not our right to punish one for thinking as he does, no matter how much we disagree.'

'Then what?' wheezed the dying man.

'You of all people should know the answer. Educate them. *Teach* them right from wrong. It must be knowledge that frees them, not force.'

Jubair chuckled. 'They do not learn, fixed in their ways as they are. You are naïve to think otherwise. It's an illness, Assassin, for which there is but one cure.'

'You're wrong. And that's why you must be put to rest.'

'Am I not unlike those precious books you seek to save? A source of knowledge with which you disagree? Yet you're rather quick to steal my life.'

'A small sacrifice to save many. It is necessary.'

'Is it not ancient scrolls that inspire the Crusaders? That fill Salah Al'din and his men with a sense of righteous fury? Their texts endanger others. Bring death in their wake. I, too, was making a small sacrifice.' He smiled. 'It matters little now. Your deed is done. And so am I.'

He died, eyes closing. Altaïr stood up. He looked around the courtyard, seeing the beauty and ugliness of it. Then, hearing footsteps approaching, he was gone.

Over the rooftops and into the streets. Blending into the city. Becoming but a blade in the crowd …

‘I have a question for *you*,’ said Al Mualim, when they next met. He had restored Altaïr’s full status and at last the Assassin was a Master Assassin once more. Still, it was as though his mentor wanted to be sure of it. Wanted to be certain that Altaïr had learned.

‘What is the truth?’ he asked.

‘We place faith in ourselves,’ replied Altaïr, eager to please him, wanting to show him that he had indeed changed. That his decision to show mercy had been the right one. ‘We see the world as it really is, and hope that one day all mankind might see the same.’

‘What is the world, then?’

‘An illusion,’ replied Altaïr. ‘One we can either submit to – as most do – or transcend.’

‘And what is it to transcend?’

‘To recognize that laws arise not from divinity, but reason. I understand now that our Creed does not command us to be free.’ And suddenly he really did understand. ‘It commands us to be wise.’

Until now he had believed in the Creed but without knowing its true meaning. It was a call to interrogate, to apply thought and learning and reason to all endeavours.

Al Mualim nodded. ‘Do you see now why the Templars are a threat?

‘Whereas we would dispel the illusion, they would use it to rule.’

‘Yes. To reshape the world in an image more pleasing to them. That is why I sent you to steal their treasure. That is why I keep it locked away. And that is why you kill them. So long as even one survives, so, too, does their desire to create a New World Order. You must now seek out Sibrand. With his death, Robert de Sable will at last be vulnerable.’

‘It will be done.’

‘Safety and peace upon you, Altair.’

27

Altaïr made what he hoped was a final trip to Acre – battle-scarred Acre, over which hung the permanent pall of death. There, he carried out his investigations, then visited Jabal in the Bureau to collect his marker. At mention of Sibrand's name, Jabal nodded sagely. 'I am familiar with the man. Newly appointed leader of the Knights Teutonic, he resides in the Venetian Quarter, and runs Acre's port.'

'I've learned as much – and more.'

Jabal raised impressed eyebrows. 'Continue then.'

Altaïr told him how Sibrand had commandeered the ships in the docks, intending to use them to establish a blockade. But not to prevent an attack by Salah Al'din. That was the revealing aspect. According to what Altaïr had learned, Sibrand planned to prevent Richard's men receiving supplies. It made perfect sense. The Templars were betraying their own. All was becoming clear to him, it seemed: the nature of the stolen artefact, the identity of the Brotherhood binding his targets together, even their ultimate aim. Yet still …

Still there was a feeling he couldn't shake off. A sense that, even now, uncertainty swirled around him like early-morning mist.

'Sibrand is said to be consumed by fear – driven mad by the knowledge that his death approaches. He has sealed the docks district, and now hides within, waiting for his ship to arrive.'

Jabal considered. 'This will make things dangerous. I wonder how he learned of your mission.'

'The men I've killed – they are all connected. Al Mualim warned me that word of my deeds has spread among them.'

'Be on your guard, Altaïr,' said Jabal, handing him the feather.

'Of course, *rafiq*. But I think it will be to my advantage. Fear will weaken him.'

He turned to leave, and as he did so, Jabal called him back. 'Altaïr …'

'Yes?'

'I owe you an apology.'

'For what?'

‘For doubting your dedication to our cause.’

Altaïr thought. ‘No. It was I who erred. I believed myself above the Creed. You owe me nothing.’

‘As you wish, my friend. Go in safety.’

Altaïr went to the docks, slipping through Sibrand’s cordon as easily as breathing. Behind him rose the walls of Acre, in various states of disrepair; ahead of him, the harbour was filled with ships and platforms, hulks and wooden carcasses. Some were working vessels, others left behind from the siege. They had transformed the gleaming blue sea into an ocean of brown flotsam.

The grey stone sun-bleached dock was its own city. Those who worked and lived there were dock people – they had the look of dock people. They had an easy manner and weathered faces accustomed to smiling.

Though not today. Not under the command of Sibrand, the Grand Master of the Knights Teutonic. Not only had he ordered the area to be sealed but he had filled it with his guards. His fear of assassination was like a virus that had spread through his army. Groups of soldiers moved through the docks with roving eyes. They were twitchy, their hands constantly flitting at the hilts of their broadswords. They were nervous, sweating under heavy chainmail.

Becoming aware of a commotion, Altaïr walked towards it, seeing citizens and soldiers doing the same. A knight was shouting at a holy man. Nearby his companions watched anxiously, while dock workers and merchants had gathered to view the spectacle.

‘Y-you are mistaken, Master Sibrand. I would never propose violence against any man – and most certainly not against you.’

So this was Sibrand. Altaïr took note of the black hair, deep brow and harsh eyes that seemed to spin wildly, like those of a sun-maddened dog. He had armed himself with every weapon he could, and his belts sagged with swords, daggers and knives. Across his back was his longbow, arrow quills peeking over his right shoulder. He looked exhausted. A man unravelling.

‘So you say,’ he said, showering the priest in spit, ‘and yet no one here will vouch for you. What am I to make of this?’

‘I-I live a simple life, my lord, as do all men of the cloth. It is not for us to call attention to ourselves.’

‘Perhaps.’ He closed his eyes. Then they snapped open. ‘Or perhaps they do not know you because you are not a man of God, but an Assassin.’

And with that he shoved the priest backwards, the old man landing badly, then scrabbling to his knees. ‘Never,’ he insisted.

‘You wear the same robes.’

The holy man was desperate now. ‘If they cover themselves as we do, it is only to instil uncertainty and fear. You must not give in.’

‘Are you calling me a coward?’’ shouted Sibrand, his voice breaking. ‘Challenging my authority? Are you, perhaps, hoping to turn my own knights against me?’

‘No. *No*. I-I don’t understand why you’re d-doing this to me … I’ve done nothing wrong.’

‘I don’t recall accusing you of any wrongdoing, which makes your outburst rather odd. Is it the presence of guilt that compels a confession?’

‘But I confess nothing,’ said the priest.

‘Ah. Defiant till the very end.’

The priest looked horrified. The more he said, the worse it got. ‘What do you mean?’ Altaïr watched as a succession of emotions passed across the old man’s face: fear, confusion, desperation, hopelessness.

‘William and Garnier were too confident. And they paid for this with their lives. I won’t make the same mistake. If you truly are a man of God, then surely the Creator will provide for you. Let him stay my hand.’

‘You’ve gone mad,’ cried the priest. He turned to implore the spectators, ‘Will none of you come forward to stop this? He is clearly poisoned by his own fear – compelled to see enemies where none exist.’

His companions shuffled awkwardly but said nothing. So, too, the citizens, who gazed at him dispassionately. The priest was no Assassin, they could see that, but it didn’t matter what they thought. They were just glad not to be the target of Sibrand’s fury.

‘It seems the people share my concern,’ said Sibrand. He drew his sword. ‘What I do, I do for Acre.’

The priest shrieked as Sibrand drove the blade into his gut, twisted, then removed it and wiped it clean. The old man writhed on the dock, then died. Sibrand’s guards picked up his body and tossed it into the water.

Sibrand watched it go. ‘Stay vigilant, men. Report any suspicious activity to the guard. I doubt we’ve seen the last of these Assassins. Persistent bastards … Now get back to work.’

Altaïr watched as he and two bodyguards made their way to a rowing-boat. The priest’s body bumped against the hull as it cast off, then began to float through the debris in the harbour. Altaïr gazed out to sea, seeing a bigger ship further out. That would be Sibrand’s sanctuary, he thought. His eyes went back to Sibrand’s skiff. He could see the knight pulling himself up to scan the water around him. Looking for Assassins. Always looking for them. As though they might appear from the water around him.

Which was exactly what he was going to do, decided Altaïr, moving to the nearest hulk and jumping to it, easily traversing boats and platforms until he came close to Sibrand's ship. There he saw Sibrand make his way up to the main deck, eyes raking the water around him. Altaïr heard him ordering the guards to secure the lower decks, then moved across to a platform near the ship.

A lookout saw him coming and was about to raise his bow when Altaïr sent him a throwing knife, mentally cursing himself for not having time to prepare the kill. Sure enough, instead of falling silently to the wood of the platform, the sentry fell into the water with a splash.

Altaïr's eyes flicked to the deck of the main ship where Sibrand had heard the splash too, and was already beginning to panic. 'I know you're out there, Assassin,' he screeched. He unslung his bow. 'How long do you think you can hide? I've a hundred men scouring the docks. They'll find you. And when they do, you'll suffer for your sins.'

Altaïr hugged the frame of the platform, out of sight. Water lapped at its struts. Otherwise, silence. An almost ghostly quiet that must have unnerved Sibrand as much as it pleased Altaïr.

'Show yourself, coward,' insisted Sibrand. His fear was in his voice. 'Face me and let us be done with this.'

All in good time, thought Altaïr. Sibrand fired an arrow at nothing, then fitted and fired another.

'On your guard, men,' shouted Sibrand, to the lower decks. 'He's out there somewhere. Find him. End his life. A promotion to whoever brings me the head of the Assassin.'

Altaïr leaped from the platform to the ship, landing with a slight thump that seemed to resonate around the area of still water. He waited, clinging to the hull, hearing Sibrand's panicked shouts from above. Then he began to climb. He waited until Sibrand's back was turned then pulled himself on to the deck, now just a few feet away from the Grand Master of the Knights Teutonic, who was prowling the deck, shouting threats to the empty sea, hurling insults and orders at his guards, who hurried about below.

Sibrand was a dead man, thought Altaïr, as he crept up behind him. He had died as much from his own fear, though he was too stupid to know it.

'Please … don't do this,' he said, as he folded to the deck with Altaïr's blade in his neck.

'You are afraid?' asked the Assassin. He withdrew his blade.

'Of course I am,' said Sibrand, as though addressing a dolt.

Altaïr thought back to Sibrand's callousness before the priest. 'But you'll be safe now,' he said, 'held in the arms of your God …'

Sibrand gave a small wet laugh. ‘Have my brothers taught you nothing? I know what waits for me. For all of us.’

‘If not your God, then what?’

‘Nothing. Nothing waits. And that is what I fear.’

‘You don’t believe,’ said Altaïr. Was it true? Sibrand had no faith? No God?

‘How could I, given what I know? What I’ve seen. Our treasure was the proof.’

‘Proof of what?’

‘That this life is all we have.’

‘Linger a while longer, then,’ pressed Altaïr, ‘and tell me of the part you were to play.’

‘A blockade by sea,’ Sibrand told him, ‘to keep the fool kings and queens from sending reinforcements. Once we … Once we …’ He was fading fast now.

‘… conquered the Holy Land?’ prompted Altaïr.

Sibrand coughed. When he next spoke, his bared teeth were coated with blood. ‘*Freed* it, you fool. From the tyranny of faith.’

‘Freedom? You worked to overthrow cities. Control men’s minds. Murdered any who spoke against you.’

‘I followed my orders, believing in my cause. Same as you.’

‘Do not be afraid,’ said Altaïr, closing his eyes.

‘We are close, Altaïr.’ Al Mualim came from behind his desk, moving through a thick shaft of light shining through the window. His pigeons cooed happily in the afternoon heat and there was that same sweet scent in the air. Yet despite the day – and although Altaïr had once again gained his rank and, more importantly, the Master’s trust – he could not yet fully relax.

‘Robert de Sable is now all that stands between us and victory,’ continued Al Mualim. ‘His mouth gives the orders. His hand pays the gold. With him dies the knowledge of the Templar Treasure and any threat it might pose.’

‘I still don’t understand how a simple bit of treasure could cause so much chaos,’ said Altaïr. He had been mulling over Sibrand’s final mysterious words. He had been thinking of the globe – the Piece of Eden. He had experienced its strange draw at first hand, of course, but surely it had merely the power to dazzle and divert. Could it really exert a hold above that of any desirable ornament? He had to admit to finding the idea fanciful.

Al Mualim nodded slowly, as though reading his thoughts. ‘The Piece of Eden is temptation given form. Look at what it’s done to Robert. Once he had tasted its power, it consumed him. He saw not a dangerous weapon to be destroyed, but a tool – one that would help him realize his life’s ambition.’

‘He dreamed of *power*, then?’

‘Yes and no. He dreamed – still dreams – like us, of peace.’

‘But this is a man who sought to see the Holy Land consumed by war …’

‘No, Altaïr,’ cried Al Mualim. ‘How can you not see when you’re the one who opened *my* eyes to this?’

‘What do you mean?’ Altaïr was puzzled.

‘What do he and his followers want? A world in which all men are united. I do not despise his goal. I share it. But I take issue with the *means*. Peace is something to be learned. To be understood. To be embraced, but…’

‘He would force it.’ Altaïr was nodding. Understanding.

‘And rob us of our free will in the process,’ agreed Al Mualim.

‘Strange … to think of him in this way,’ said Altaïr.

‘Never harbour hate for your victims, Altair. Such thoughts are poison and will cloud your judgement.’

‘Could he not be convinced, then? To end his mad quest?’

Al Mualim shook his head slowly and sadly. ‘I spoke to him – in my way – through you. What was each killing, if not a message? But he has chosen to ignore us.’

‘Then there’s only one thing left to do.’

At last he was to hunt de Sable. The thought thrilled Altaïr but he was careful to balance it with notes of caution. He would not make the mistake of underestimating him again. Not de Sable, or anybody.

‘Jerusalem is where you faced him first. It’s where you’ll find him now,’ said Al Mualim, and released his bird. ‘Go, Altair. It’s time to finish this.’

Altaïr left, descending the stairs to the doors of the tower and coming out into the courtyard. Abbas was sitting on the fence, and Altaïr felt his eyes on him as he crossed the courtyard. Then he stopped and turned to face him. Their eyes met and Altaïr was about to say something – he wasn’t sure what. But he thought better of it. He had a task ahead of him. Old wounds were exactly that: old wounds. Unconsciously, however, his hand went to his side.

28

The morning after Altaïr had told Abbas the truth about his father, Abbas had been even more withdrawn, and nothing Altaïr said could bring him out of that state. They ate their breakfast in silence, sullenly submitting to the attentions of their governesses, then went to Al Mualim's study and took their places on the floor.

If Al Mualim had noticed a difference in his two charges, he said nothing. Perhaps he was privately pleased that the boys seemed less easily distracted that day. Perhaps he simply assumed that they had fallen out, as young friends were inclined to do.

Altaïr, however, sat with twisted insides and a tortured mind. Why had Abbas said nothing? Why hadn't he reacted to what Altaïr had told him?

He was to get his answer later that day, when they went to the training yard as usual. They were to practise sword together, sparring as always. But today Abbas had decided that he wanted to use not the small wooden swords they normally sparred with but the shiny blades to which they planned to graduate.

Labib, their instructor, was delighted. 'Excellent, excellent,' he said, clapping his hands together, 'but, remember, there is nothing to be gained from drawing blood. We'll not trouble the physicians, if you please. This shall be a test of restraint and of cunning as much as it is of skill.'

'Cunning,' said Abbas. 'That should suit you, Altaïr. You are cunning and treacherous.'

They were the first words he had spoken to Altaïr all day. And as he said them he fixed Altaïr with a look of such contempt, such hatred, that Altaïr knew things would never be the same between them. He looked at Labib, wanting to appeal, to implore him not to allow the contest, but he was hopping happily over the small fence that surrounded the training quadrangle, relishing the prospect of some proper combat at last.

They took up position, Altaïr swallowing, Abbas staring hard at him.

'Brother,' began Altaïr, 'what I said last night, I –'

'*Do not call me brother!*' Abbas's shout rang around the courtyard. And he sprang towards Altaïr with a ferocity the boy had never seen in him before. But

though his teeth were bared, Altaïr could see the tears that had formed at the corners of his eyes. There was more to this than simple anger, he knew.

'No, Abbas,' he called, desperately defending. He glanced to his left and saw the instructor's puzzled look – he was clearly not sure what to make of Abbas's outburst or the sudden hostility between the two. Altaïr saw two more Assassins approaching the training area, evidently having heard Abbas's cry. Faces appeared in the window of the defensive tower by the citadel entrance. He wondered if Al Mualim was watching …

Abbas jabbed forward with his swordpoint, forcing Altaïr to dodge to the side.

'Now, Abbas …' chided Labib.

'He means to kill me, Master,' shouted Altaïr.

'Don't be dramatic, child,' said the instructor, though he didn't sound altogether convinced. 'You could learn from your brother's commitment.'

'*I am not*.' Abbas attacked. '*His*.' The boy's words were punctuated with savage strikes of the sword. '*Brother*.'

'I told you to help you,' shouted Altaïr.

'No,' screamed Abbas. 'You lied.' Again he struck and there was a great chime of steel. Altaïr found himself thrown back by the force, stumbling at the fence and almost falling backwards over it. More Assassins had arrived. Some looked concerned, others ready to be entertained.

'Defend, Altaïr, defend,' roared Labib, clapping his hands with glee. Altaïr threw up his sword, returning Abbas's strikes and forcing him into the centre of the quadrangle once more.

'I told the truth,' he hissed, as they came close, the blades of their swords sliding against one another. 'I told you the truth to end your suffering, just as I would have wanted mine ending.'

'You lied to bring shame upon me,' said Abbas, falling back and taking up position, crouched, one arm thrown back as they'd been taught, the blade of his sword quivering.

'*No!*' cried Altaïr. He danced back as Abbas thrust forward. But with a flick of his wrist Abbas caught Altaïr with his blade, opening a nick that bled warm down Altaïr's side. He glanced over at Labib with beseeching eyes, but his concerns were waved away. He placed a hand to his side and came away with bloodied fingertips that he held out to Abbas.

'Stop this, Abbas,' he pleaded. 'I spoke the truth in the hope of bringing you comfort.'

'Comfort,' said Abbas. The boy was talking to the assembled crowd now. 'To bring me *comfort* he tells me my father killed himself.'

There was a moment of shocked silence. Altaïr looked from Abbas to those who were now watching, unable to comprehend the turn of events. The secret he had sworn to keep had been made public.

He glanced up to Al Mualim's tower. Saw the Master standing there, watching, his hands behind his back and an unreadable expression on his face.

'*Abbas*,' shouted Labib, at last seeing something was amiss. '*Altaïr*.'

But the two fighting boys ignored him, their swords meeting again. Altaïr, in pain, was forced to defend.

'I thought –' he began.

'You thought you would bring shame upon me,' shrieked Abbas. The tears were falling down his face now and he circled Altaïr, then pushed forward again, swinging his sword wildly. Altaïr crouched and found space between Abbas's arm and body. He struck, opening a wound on Abbas's left arm that he hoped would at least stop him long enough for Altaïr to try to explain –

But Abbas shrieked. And with a final war cry he leaped towards Altaïr who ducked beneath his flailing blade, using his shoulder to upset Abbas's forward momentum so that now they were rolling in the ground in a mess of dirt and bloodied robes. For a moment they grappled, then Altaïr felt a searing pain in his side, Abbas digging his thumb into the wound and using the opportunity to twist, heaving himself on top of Altaïr and pinning him to the ground. From his belt he produced his dagger and held it to Altaïr's throat. His wild eyes were fixed on Altaïr. They still poured with tears. He breathed heavily through bared teeth.

'*Abbas!*' came the shout, not from Labib or any of those who had gathered to watch. This came from the window of Al Mualim. 'Put away the knife at once,' he roared, his voice a thunderclap in the courtyard.

In response Abbas sounded small and desperate. 'Not until he admits.'

'Admits what?' cried Altaïr, struggling but held firm.

Labib had climbed over the fence. 'Now, Abbas,' he said, with placating palms held out. 'Do as the Master says.'

'Come any closer and I'll carve him,' growled Abbas.

The instructor stopped. 'He'll put you in the cells for this, Abbas. This is no way for the Order to behave. Look, there are citizens here from the village. Word will spread.'

'I don't care,' wept Abbas. 'He needs to say it. He needs to say he lied about my father.'

'What lie?'

'He told me my father killed himself. That he came to Altaïr's quarters to say sorry, then slashed his own throat. But he *lied*. My father did not kill himself. He

left the Brotherhood. That was his apology. Now tell me you lied.' He jabbed the point of the dagger into Altair's throat, drawing more blood.

'Abbas, stop this,' roared Al Mualim from his tower.

'Altaïr, did you lie?' asked Labib.

A silence shrouded the training yard: all waited for Altaïr's reply. He looked up at Abbas.

'Yes,' he said. 'I did lie.'

Abbas sat back on his haunches and squeezed his eyes shut. Whatever pain went through him seemed to rack his entire body, and as he dropped the dagger with a clang to the ground of the quadrangle, he began weeping. He was still weeping as Labib came to him and grabbed him roughly by the arm, pulling him to his feet and delivering him to a pair of guards, who came hurrying up. Moments later Altaïr was also grabbed. He, too, was manhandled to the cells.

Later, Al Mualim decided that after a month in the dungeons, they should resume their training. Abbas's crime was deemed the more serious of the two; it was he who had allowed his emotions free rein and by doing so brought disrepute to the Order. His punishment was that his training be extended for an extra year. He would still be on the training yard with Labib when Altaïr was made an Assassin. The injustice increased his hatred of Altaïr, who slowly came to see Abbas as a pathetic, bitter figure. When the citadel was attacked, it was Altaïr who saved the life of Al Mualim and was elevated to Master Assassin. That day, Abbas spat in the dirt at Altaïr's feet but Altaïr just sneered at him. Abbas, he decided, was as weak and ineffectual as his father had been.

Perhaps, looking back, that was how he had first become infected by arrogance.

29

When Altaïr next arrived at the Jerusalem Bureau, it was as a changed man. Not that he would make the mistake of thinking his journey was over – that would have been an error made by the old Altaïr. No, he knew that it was just beginning. It was as though Malik sensed it too. There was something changed about the Bureau leader when Altaïr entered. There was a new respect and accord between them.

‘Safety and peace, Altaïr,’ he said.

‘Upon you as well, brother,’ replied Altaïr, and there was an unspoken moment between them.

‘Seems Fate has a strange way with things …’

Altaïr nodded. ‘So it’s true, then? Robert de Sable is in Jerusalem?

‘I’ve seen the knights myself.’ Malik’s hand went to his stump. Reminded of it by mention of the Templar.

‘Only misfortune follows that man. If he’s here, it’s because he intends ill. I won’t give him the chance to act,’ said Altaïr.

‘Do not let vengeance cloud your thoughts, brother. We both know no good can come of that.’

Altaïr smiled. ‘I have not forgotten. You have nothing to fear. I do not seek revenge, but knowledge.’

Once he would have said such a thing parrot fashion, knowing the beliefs expected of him. Now he truly believed it.

Again, Malik somehow understood. ‘Truly you are not the man I once knew,’ he said.

Altaïr nodded. ‘My work has taught me many things. Revealed secrets to me. But there are still pieces of this puzzle I do not possess.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘All the men I’ve laid to rest have worked together, united by this man. Robert has designs upon the land. This much I know for certain. But how and why? When and where? These things remain out of reach.’

‘Crusaders and Saracens working together?’ wondered Malik, aloud.

‘They are none of these things, but something else. Templars.’

‘The Templars are a part of the Crusader army,’ said Malik, though the question was written all over his face: how could they be King Richard’s men if they were staying in Jerusalem? Walking the city streets?

‘Or so they’d like King Richard to believe,’ said Altaïr. ‘No. Their only allegiance is to Robert de Sable and some mad idea that *they* will stop the war.’

‘You spin a strange tale.’

‘You have no idea, Malik …’

‘Then tell me.’

Altaïr began to tell Malik what he had learned so far. ‘Robert and his Templars walk the city. They’ve come to pay their respects to Majd Addin. They’ll attend his funeral. Which means so will I.’

‘What is this that Templars would attend his funeral?’

‘I have yet to divine their true intentions, though I’ll have a confession in time. The citizens themselves are divided. Many call for their lives. Still others insist that they are here to parley. To make peace.’

He thought of the orator he’d questioned, who had been adamant that his masters wanted an end to war. De Sable, a Christian, was attending Majd Addin’s funeral, he a Muslim. Wasn’t that proof that the Templars sought a united Holy Land? The citizens were hostile to the notion of Templars being present in Jerusalem. The Crusader occupation was still fresh in their minds. Unsurprisingly there had been reports of fighting breaking out between Crusaders and Saracens, who took exception to the sight of knights in the streets. The city remained unconvinced by the orators who insisted that they came in the name of peace.

‘*Peace?*’ said Malik, now.

‘I told you. The others I have slain have said as much to me.’

‘That would make them our allies. And yet we kill them.’

‘Make no mistake, we are nothing like these men. Though their goal sounds noble, the means by which they’d achieve it are not. At least … that’s what Al Mualim told me.’

He ignored the tiny worm of doubt that slithered in the pit of his stomach.

‘So what is your plan?’

‘I’ll attend the funeral and confront Robert.’

‘The sooner the better,’ agreed Malik, handing Altaïr the feather. ‘Fortune favour your blade, brother.’

Altaïr took the marker. Swallowing, he said, ‘Malik … Before I go, there’s something I should say.’

‘Out with it.’

‘I’ve been a fool.’

Malik gave a dry laugh. ‘Normally I’d make no argument, but what is this? What are you talking about?’

‘All this time … I never told you I was sorry. Too damned proud. You lost your arm because of me. Lost Kadar. You had every right to be angry.’

‘I do not accept your apology.’

‘I understand.’

‘No. You don’t. I do not accept your apology, because you are not the same man who went with me into Solomon’s Temple, so *you* have nothing to apologize for.

‘Malik …’

‘Perhaps if I had not been so envious of you, I would not have been so careless myself. I am just as much to blame.’

‘Don’t say such things.’

‘We are one. As we share the glory of our victories, so too should we share the pain of our defeat. In this way we grow closer. We grow stronger.’

‘Thank you, brother.’

And so it was that Altaïr found himself at the cemetery, a small, unadorned burial ground, joining a sparse crowd of Templars and civilians who had gathered around the burial mound of Majd Addin, the erstwhile city regent.

The body would have been bathed and shrouded and carried in a procession, then buried on its right side and the hole filled, members of the procession adding dirt to the grave. As Altaïr entered, an imam was stepping up to deliver the funeral prayer and a hush had descended over the holy ground. Most stood with their hands clasped in front of them and their heads bowed in respect for the dead, so it was an easy task for Altaïr to slip through the crowd in order to gain a good vantage point. To locate his final target. He who had set Altaïr on this path – whose death would be just retribution for the suffering he had caused and that which had happened in his name: Robert de Sable.

Passing along the rows of mourners, Altaïr realized it was the first time that he had ever found himself at the funeral of one of his targets, and he cast a look around to see if there were any grieving members of the dead man’s family nearby, wondering how he, the killer, would feel to be confronted by their grief. But if Majd Addin had had close relatives they were either absent or kept their sorrow hidden among the crowd; there was no one at the graveside but the imam and …

A cluster of Templar knights.

They stood in front of an ornately decorated fountain set into a tall sandstone wall, three of them, wearing armour and full-face helmets, even the one who

stood in front of the other two, who also wore a cape. The distinctive cape of the Templar Grand Master.

And yet … Altaïr squinted, staring at de Sable. The knight was somehow not as Altaïr remembered him. Had his memory played tricks on him? Had Robert de Sable taken on greater dimensions in his head because he had bested Altaïr? Certainly he seemed to lack the stature that Altaïr remembered. Where, also, were the rest of his men?

Now the imam had begun to speak, addressing the mourners: 'We gather here to mourn the loss of our beloved Majd Addin, taken too soon from this world. I know you feel sorrow and pain at his passing. But you should not. For just as we are all brought forth from the womb, so too must we all one day pass from this world. It is only natural – like the rising and the setting of the sun. Take this moment to reflect on his life and give thanks for all the good he did. Know that one day you will stand with him again in Paradise.'

Altaïr fought to hide his disgust. 'The *beloved* Majd Addin'. The same beloved Majd Addin who had been a traitor to the Saracens, who had sought to undermine trust in them by indiscriminately executing the citizens of Jerusalem? *That* beloved Majd Addin? It was no wonder that the crowd was so sparse, and grief so little in evidence. He was about as beloved as leprosy.

The imam began to lead the mourners in prayer. 'O God, bless Muhammad, his family, his companions, O merciful and majestic. O God, more majestic than they describe, peace on the Prophets, blessings from the God of the Universe.'

Altaïr's gaze went from him to de Sable and his bodyguard. A wink of sun caught his eye and he glanced up at the wall behind the trio of knights to the ramparts that ran along the outside of the courtyard. Was it a movement he'd seen? Perhaps. Extra Templar soldiers could easily take cover in the ramparts.

He glanced again at the three knights – Robert de Sable, as if standing for inspection, offering himself as a target. His build. Too slight, surely. The cape. It looked too long.

No. Altaïr decided to abandon the assassination because there was no ignoring his instinct here. It wasn't telling him something was wrong. It was saying nothing was right. He began to edge back, just as the imam's tone changed.

'As you know, this man was murdered by Assassins. We have tried to track his killer, but it has proved difficult. These creatures cling to the shadows and run from any who would face them fairly.'

Altaïr froze, knowing now that the trap was to be sprung. He tried to push through the crowd more quickly.

'But not today,' he heard the imam call, 'for it seems one stands among us. He mocks us with his presence and must be made to pay.'

Suddenly the crowd around Altaïr opened, forming a circle around him. He wheeled, seeing the graveside where the imam stood pointing – at him. De Sable and his two men were moving forward. Around him the crowd looked fierce, and was closing in to swamp him, leaving him no escape route.

'Seize him. Bring him forward that God's justice might be done,' called the imam.

In one movement Altaïr drew his sword and ejected his blade. He remembered his Master's words: *Choose one*.

But there was no need. The mourners might have been brave and Majd Addin beloved, but nobody was prepared to shed blood to avenge him. Panicked, the crowd broke up, mourners falling over their robes to escape, Altaïr using the sudden confusion to dart to one side, breaking the advancing Templars' line of sight. The first of them just had time to register that one member of the crowd was not escaping, but instead moving towards him, before Altaïr's sword was through his mail and in his gut and he fell away.

Altaïr saw a door in the wall open and more knights come pouring through. Five at least. At the same time there was a hail of arrows from above, and one knight was spinning and falling, the shaft protruding from his neck. Altaïr's eyes shot to the ramparts where he saw Templar archers. On this occasion their aim had favoured him. He was unlikely to be quite so fortunate next time.

The second of the two bodyguards came forward and he swiped with his blade, slicing at the man's neck and sending him down in a spray of blood. He turned to de Sable, who came forward swinging his broadsword hard enough to send Altaïr stumbling back, only just able to deflect the blow. Suddenly there were reinforcements, and he was trading blows with three other knights, all in full-face helmets, and finding that he was now standing on Majd Addin's final resting place. There was no time to enjoy the moment, though: from above came another hail of arrows and, to Altaïr's delight, a second knight was speared, screaming as he fell. The effect on the remaining Templars was to send them into disarray and they scattered a little, less frightened of Altaïr than they were of their own archers, just as de Sable began screeching at the bowmen to stop firing on their own men.

And Altaïr was so surprised that he almost dropped his guard. What he had heard was not the unmistakably male French tones of Robert de Sable but a voice that surely belonged to a woman. An *English* woman.

For a heartbeat he was taken aback by a mixture of bemusement and admiration. This … *woman*, the stand-in sent by de Sable, fought as bravely as any man, and wielded a broadsword just as adeptly as any knight he had ever encountered. Who was she? One of de Sable's lieutenants? His lover? Keeping

close to the cover of the wall, Altaïr felled another of the knights. Just one left. One more, and de Sable's stand-in. The last Templar had less appetite for the fight than she did, though, and he died, thrashing on the point of Altaïr's sword.

Just her now and they traded blows, until at last Altaïr was able to get the better of her, sliding the blade into her shoulder at the same time as he swept her legs from beneath her and she crashed heavily to the ground. Scurrying into cover, he pulled her with him so that they were both out of sight of the archers. Then he leaned over her. Still wearing the helmet, her chest heaved. Blood spread across her neck and shoulder but she would live, thought Altaïr – if he allowed her to, that was.

'I would see your eyes before you die,' he said.

He pulled off the helmet, and was still taken aback to be confronted by the truth.

'I sense you expected someone else,' she said, smiling a little. Her hair was hidden by the chainmail coif she wore, but Altaïr was entranced by her eyes. There was determination behind them, he saw, but something else too. Softness and light. And he found himself wondering if her obvious skills as a warrior belied her true nature.

But why – whatever command of combat she possessed – would de Sable send this woman in his stead? What special abilities might she have? He placed his blade to her neck. 'What sorcery is this?' he asked cautiously.

'We knew you'd come,' she said, still smiling. 'Robert needed to be sure he'd have time to get away.'

'So he flees?'

'We cannot deny your success. You have laid waste our plans. First the treasure – then our men. Control of the Holy Land slipped away … But he saw an opportunity to reclaim what has been stolen. To turn your victories to our advantage.'

'Al Mualim still holds the treasure and we've routed your army before,' replied Altaïr. 'Whatever Robert plans, he'll fail again.'

'Ah,' she said, 'but it's not just Templars you'll contend with now.'

Altaïr bridled. 'Speak sense,' he demanded.

'Robert rides for Arsuf to plead his case, that Saracen and Crusader unite against the Assassins.'

'That will never happen. They have no reason to.'

Her smile broadened. 'Had, perhaps. But now you've given them one. Nine, in fact. The bodies you've left behind – victims on both sides. You've made the Assassins an enemy in common and ensured the annihilation of your entire Order. Well done.'

‘Not nine. Eight.’

‘What do you mean?’

He removed his blade from her neck. ‘You were not my target. I will not take your life.’ He stood. ‘You’re free to go. But do not follow me.’

‘I don’t need to,’ she said, pulling herself to her feet and clasping one hand to the wound at her shoulder. ‘You’re already too late …’

‘We’ll see.’

With a final glance at the ramparts, where archers were hurrying to new positions, Altaïr darted off, leaving the cemetery empty, apart from its corpses old and new – and the strange, brave and entrancing woman.

‘It was a trap,’ he exclaimed to Malik, moments later, the time it had taken him to make his way from the cemetery to the Bureau, his mind working furiously as he did so.

‘I had heard the funeral turned to chaos … What happened?’

‘Robert de Sable was never there. He sent another in his stead. He was expecting me –’

‘You must go to Al Mualim,’ said Malik, firmly.

Yes, thought Altaïr, he should. But there was that insistent feeling again. The one that told him there was yet more mystery to uncover. And why did he think it somehow involved the Master? ‘There’s no time. She told me where he’s gone. What he plans. If I return to Masyaf, he might succeed … And then … I fear we’ll be destroyed.’

‘We have killed most of his men. He cannot hope to mount a proper attack. Wait,’ said Malik. ‘Did you say she?’

‘Yes. It was a woman. Strange, I know. But that’s for another time. For now we must focus on Robert. We may have thinned his ranks, but the man is clever. He goes to plead his case to Richard and Salah Al’din. To *unite* them against a common enemy … Against us.’

‘Surely you are mistaken. This makes no sense. Those two men would never –’

‘Oh, but they would. And we have ourselves to blame. The men I’ve killed – men on both sides of the conflict … men important to both leaders … Robert’s plan may be ambitious, but it makes sense. And it could work.’

‘Look, brother, things have changed. You *must* return to Masyaf. We cannot act without the Master’s permission. It could compromise the Brotherhood. I thought … I thought you had learned this.’

‘Stop hiding behind words, Malik. You wield the Creed and its tenets like a shield. He’s keeping things from us. Important things. You’re the one who told

me we can never *know* anything, only suspect. Well, I suspect this business with the Templars goes deeper. When I'm done with Robert I will ride for Masyaf that we may have answers. But perhaps *you* could go now.'

'I cannot leave the city.'

'Then walk among its people. Seek out those who served the ones I slew. Learn what you can. You call yourself perceptive. Perhaps you'll see something I could not.'

'I don't know … I must think on this.'

'Do as you must, my friend. But I will ride for Arsuf. Every moment I delay, our enemy is one step further ahead of me.'

Once more he had breached the Creed: unwitting or not, he had put the Order in danger.

'Be careful, brother.'

'I will. I promise.'

30

The armies of Salah Al’din and Richard the Lionheart had met at Arsuf, and as he made his way there Altaïr learned – from the gossip he overheard at blacksmiths’ and waterholes along the route – that after a series of minor skirmishes the battle had begun that morning, when Salah Al’din’s Turks had launched an attack on the Crusader ranks.

Riding towards it, against the flow of anxious countryfolk wanting to escape the slaughter, Altaïr saw plumes of smoke on the horizon. As he came closer he could make out the soldiers at war on the distant plain. Knots of them, huge, dark clusters in the distance. He saw a long band of thousands of men, moving in fast on horseback, charging the enemy, but was too far away to see whether the charge was Saracen or Crusader. Closer, he could see the wooden frames of war machines, at least one on fire. Now he could discern the tall wooden crucifixes of the Christians, huge crosses on wheeled platforms that the infantry pushed forward, and the flags of the Saracens and the Crusaders. The sky darkened with hails of arrows from archers on either side. He saw knights on horseback with pikes, and packs of Saracen horsemen making devastating sorties into the ranks of the Crusaders.

He could hear the drumming of hoofs on the plain, and the constant crash of Saracen cymbals, drums, gongs and trumpets. He could hear the noise of the battle: the unending all-encompassing din of the shouts of the living, the screams of the dying, the sharp rattle of steel on steel and the pitiful whinnies of wounded horses. He began to come across riderless animals and bodies now, Saracen and Crusader, spreadeagled in the dirt or sitting dead against trees.

He reined back his mount – just in time, because suddenly Saracen archers began to appear from the treeline some way ahead of him. He dropped from his horse and rolled from the main track, taking cover behind an upturned cart. There were maybe a hundred of them all told. They ran across the track and into trees on the other side. They moved quickly and were bent low. They moved as soldiers move when they are stealthily advancing into enemy-held territory.

Altaïr stood and darted into the trees, too, following the bowmen at a safe distance. For some miles he pursued them, the sounds of the battle, the

vibrations of it, growing stronger until they came upon a ridge. Now they were above the main battle, which raged below them, and for a moment the sheer size of it took his breath away. Everywhere – as far as the eye could see – there were men, bodies, machines and horses.

As at the Siege of Acre he found himself in the middle of a fierce and savage conflict with no side to call his own. What he had was the Order. What he had was a mission to protect it, to stop the beast that he had unwittingly unleashed from tearing it apart.

All round him on the ridge were bodies, too, as though there had already been a battle a short time ago. And of course there had: whoever held the ridge had the advantage of height, so it was likely to be savagely contested. Sure enough, as they came upon it, the Saracens were met by Crusader infantry and bowmen and a great shout went up from both sides. Salah Al'din's men had the element of surprise and so the upper hand, and the first wave of their attack left the bodies of knights in their wake, some falling from the ridge into the seething war below. But as Altaïr crouched and watched, the Crusaders managed to regroup and the combat began in earnest.

Passing along the ridge was the safest way of moving to the rear of the Crusader lines, where Richard the Lionheart would be stationed. And reaching him was the only hope he had of stopping Robert de Sable. He came closer to the battle and began to move to his left, leaving a wide berth between himself and the combatants. He came upon a Crusader who was crouched in the undergrowth, watching the battle and whimpering, and left him, running onwards.

Suddenly there was a shout and two Crusaders moved into his path, their broadswords raised. He stopped, crossed his arms and reached to his shoulders, drawing his sword with one hand and flicking a knife with the other. One of the scouts went down and he moved to the other and had felled him when he realized that they weren't scouts. They were sentries.

Still overlooking the battle he found that he was on the brow of a hill. Some distance away he could see the standard of Richard the Lionheart and thought he caught a glimpse of the King himself, sitting astride his distinctive steed, flaming orange beard and hair bright in the afternoon sun. But now more rearguard infantry were arriving and he found himself swamped by knights, chainmail rattling, their swords raised and their eyes full of battle beneath their helmets.

Their task was to protect their liege; Altaïr's was to reach him. For long moments the battle raged. Altaïr danced and ran, sometimes carving himself a route, his bloody sword flashing, sometimes able to make a long dash, coming ever closer to where he could now see Richard. The King was in a clearing. He

had dismounted, wary of the commotion approaching, and his immediate bodyguard were forming a ring around him, making him a small target.

Still fighting, his sword still swinging, men falling at his feet, his robes stained with Crusader blood, Altaïr broke clear of an attack and was able to dash forwards. He saw the King's lieutenants draw their swords, eyes fierce under their helmets. He saw archers scrabbling up to surrounding boulders, hoping to find a lofty position in order to pick off the intruder.

'Hold a moment,' called Altaïr. Just a few feet away now, he looked King Richard in the eyes, even as his men came forward. 'It's words I bring, not steel.'

The King wore his regal red, at his chest a gold-embroidered lion. He was the only man among them not cursed by fear or panic and he stood utterly calm at the battle's centre. He raised an arm and his men stopped their advance, the battle dying in an instant. Altaïr was grateful to see his attackers fall back a few paces, giving him room at last. He dropped his sword arm. As he caught his breath, his shoulders rose and fell heavily and he knew that all eyes were on him. Every swordpoint was aimed at his gut; every archer had him in his sights. One word from Richard and he would fall.

Instead, Richard said, 'Offering terms of a surrender, then? It's about time.'

'No. You misunderstand,' said Altaïr. 'It is Al Mualim who sends me, not Salah Al'din.'

The King darkened. '*Assassin*? What is the meaning of this? And be quick with it.' The men pressed forward a little. The archers tensed.

'You've a traitor in your midst,' said Altaïr.

'And he has hired you to kill me?' called the King. 'Come to gloat about it before you strike? I won't be taken so easily.'

'It's not you I've come to kill. It's him.'

'Speak, then, that I may judge the truth.' King Richard beckoned Altaïr forward. 'Who is this traitor?'

'Robert de Sable.'

Richard's eyebrows raised in surprise. 'My lieutenant?'

'He aims to betray,' said Altaïr, evenly. He was trying to choose his words carefully, desperate not to be misunderstood. Needing the King to believe him.

'That's not the way he tells it,' said Richard. 'He seeks revenge against your people for the havoc you've wrought in Acre. And I am inclined to support him. Some of my best men were murdered by some of yours.'

So – Robert de Sable already had the King's ear. Altaïr took a deep breath. What he was about to say could mean his immediate death. 'It was *I* who killed them. And for good reason.' Richard glowered but Altaïr pressed on: 'Hear me

out. William of Montferrat. He sought to use his soldiers to take Acre by force. Garnier de Naplouse. He would use his skills to indoctrinate and control any who resisted. Sibrand. He intended to block the ports, preventing your kingdom from providing aid. They betrayed you. And they took their orders from Robert.'

'You expect me to believe this outlandish tale?' said the Lionheart.

'You knew these men better than I. Are you truly surprised to learn of their ill intentions?'

Richard seemed to think for a moment, then turned to one of the men standing at his side, who wore a full-face helmet. 'Is this true?' he said.

The knight removed his helmet, and this time it really was Robert de Sable. Altaïr looked at him with open disgust, remembering his crimes. This man had sent a woman as his stand-in.

For a heartbeat the two stared at one another, the first time they had met since the fight below the Temple Mount. Still breathing hard, Altaïr clenched his fist. De Sable smirked, his lip curling, then turned to Richard. 'My liege …' he said, in an exasperated tone '… it is an Assassin who stands before us. These creatures are masters of manipulation. Of *course* it isn't true.'

'I've no reason to deceive,' snapped Altaïr.

'Oh, but you do,' sneered de Sable. 'You're afraid of what will happen to your little fortress. Can it withstand the combined might of the Saracen and Crusader armies?' He grinned, as though already imagining the fall of Masyaf.

'My concern is for the people of the Holy Land,' Altaïr countered. 'If I must sacrifice myself for there to be peace, so be it.'

Richard had been watching them with a bemused expression. 'This is a strange place we find ourselves in. Each of you accusing the other …'

'There really is no time for this,' said de Sable. 'I must be off to meet with Saladin and enlist his aid. The longer we delay, the harder this will become.' He made to move off, hoping, no doubt, that the matter was at an end.

'Wait, Robert,' said Richard. His eyes went from de Sable to Altaïr and back again.

With a snort of frustration, de Sable snapped, '*Why?* What do you intend? Surely you do not believe *him*?' He indicated Altaïr, who could see in de Sable's eyes that maybe the King had his doubts. Perhaps he was even inclined to believe the word of the Assassin over that of the Templar. Altaïr held his breath.

'It is a difficult decision,' replied the King. 'one I cannot make alone. I must leave it in the hands of one wiser than I.'

'Thank you.'

'No, Robert, not you.'

'Then who?'

‘The Lord.’ He smiled, as if pleased to have come to the right decision. ‘Let this be decided by combat. Surely God will side with the one whose cause is righteous.’

Altaïr watched Robert carefully. He saw the look that passed across the Templar’s face, de Sable no doubt recalling the last time they had met when he had easily bested Altaïr.

Altaïr was recalling the same encounter. He was telling himself that he was a different warrior now: last time he had been handicapped by arrogance, which was why he had been so easily defeated. He was trying not to recall the knight’s great strength. How he had picked up and tossed Altaïr as easily as hefting a sack of wheat.

De Sable was remembering that, though, and he turned to King Richard, bowing his head in assent. ‘If that is what you wish,’ he said.

‘It is.’

‘So be it. To arms, Assassin.’

The King and his right-hand men stood to one side while the remaining members of the bodyguard formed a ring around Altaïr and the smiling de Sable. Unlike Altaïr he was not already battleworn and weary. He wore armour where Altaïr had only a robe. He had not suffered the cuts and blows that Altaïr had received in his battle to reach the clearing. He knew that, too. As he pulled on chainmail gauntlets and one of the men came forward to help him with his helmet, he knew that he had the advantage in every way.

‘So,’ he said, taunting, ‘we face each other once more. Let us hope you prove more of a challenge this time.’

‘I am not the man you faced inside the Temple,’ said Altaïr, raising his sword. The thunder of the great battle of Arsuf seemed distant now; his world had shrunk to just this circle. Just him and de Sable.

‘You look the same to me,’ said de Sable. He raised his sword to address Altaïr. In reply the Assassin did the same. They stood, Robert de Sable with his weight adjusted to his back foot, evidently expecting Altaïr to come forward first.

But the Assassin claimed the first surprise of the duel, remaining unmoved, waiting instead for de Sable’s attack. ‘Appearances can deceive,’ he said.

‘True. True,’ said de Sable, with a wry smile and, in the very next second, struck, and chopped hard with his sword.

The Assassin blocked. The force of de Sable’s strike almost knocked the sword from his hand, but he parried and skipped to the side, trying to find a way inside de Sable’s guards. The Templar’s broadsword was three times the weight of his blade, and though knights were famed for their dedication to sword

training and usually had the strength to match, they were nevertheless slower. De Sable could be more devastating in his attack, but he could never be as fast.

That was how Altaïr could beat him. His mistake before had been to allow de Sable to use his advantages. His strength now was to deny him them.

Still confident, de Sable pressed forward. 'Soon this will be over and Masyaf will fall,' he muttered, so close with the mighty blade that Altaïr heard it whistle past his ear.

'My brothers are stronger than you think,' he replied.

Their steel clashed once more.

'We'll know the truth of that soon enough,' grinned de Sable.

But Altaïr danced. He defended and parried and deflected, cutting nicks in de Sable, opening gashes in the mail, landing two or three stunning blows on the knight's helmet. Then de Sable was backing away to gather his strength, perhaps realizing now that Altaïr wouldn't be the easy kill he had assumed.

'Oh,' he said. 'So the child has learned to use a blade.'

'I've had a lot of practice. Your men saw to that.'

'They were sacrificed in service to a higher cause.'

'As will you be.'

De Sable leaped forward, wielding the great sword and almost knocking Altaïr's blade from his hand. But the Assassin bent and twisted in one easy movement ramming back with the hilt of his weapon so that de Sable was sent stumbling back, falling over his own feet. The wind came out of him and he was only just prevented from falling to the dust by the knights forming the ring, who righted him so that he stood there, bristling with fury and breathing heavily.

'*The time for games is ended!*' he bellowed, as though saying it loudly might somehow make it come true, and he sprang forward, but with no deadly grace now. With nothing more deadly than blind hope.

'It ended long ago,' said Altaïr. He felt a great calmness, knowing now that he was pure – pure Assassin. That he was to defeat Robert de Sable with thought as much as might. And as de Sable pressed forward once more, his attack more ragged this time, more desperate, Altaïr easily fended him off.

'I do not know where your strength comes from …' gasped de Sable. 'Some trick. Or is it drugs?'

'It is as your king said. Righteousness will always triumph over greed.'

'*My cause is righteous!*' cried de Sable, grunting now as he lifted his sword, almost painfully slowly. Altaïr saw the faces of his men. Could see them waiting for him to deliver the killing blow.

Which he did. Driving his sword straight through the centre of the red cross de Sable wore, parting the knight's mail and piercing his chest.

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De Sable gasped. His eyes widened and his mouth dropped open, hands going to the blade that impaled him, even as Altaïr withdrew it. A red stain spread across his tunic, and he staggered, then sank to his knees. His sword dropped and his arms dangled.

Straight away Altaïr's eyes went to the men forming a ring around them. He was half expecting them to attack at the sight of the Templar Grand Master dying. But they remained still. Past them Altaïr saw King Richard, his chin tilted as though the turn of events had done little more than pique his curiosity.

Now Altaïr bent to de Sable, cradling him with one arm and laying him on the ground. 'It's done, then,' he told him. 'Your schemes – like you – are put to rest.'

In response, de Sable chortled drily. 'You know nothing of schemes,' he said. 'You're but a puppet. He betrayed you, boy. Just as he betrayed me.'

'Speak sense, Templar,' hissed Altaïr, 'or not at all.' He stole a look at the men of the ring. They remained impassive.

'Nine men he sent you to kill, yes?' said de Sable. 'The nine who guarded the Treasure's secret.'

It was always nine who had that task, the responsibility handed down through generations of Templars. Almost a hundred years ago, the Knights Templar had formed and made the Temple Mount their base. They had come together to protect those making the pilgrimage to the holiest of holies and lived their lives as warrior monks – or so they maintained. But, as all but the most gullible knew, the Templars had more on their minds than helpless pilgrims. In fact, they were searching for treasure and holy relics within the Temple of Solomon. Nine, always, were tasked with finding it, and nine had finally done so: de Sable, Tamir, de Naplouse, Talal, de Montferrat, Majd Addin, Jubair, Sibrand, Abu'l Nuqoud. The nine who knew. The nine victims.

'What of it?' said Altaïr carefully. Thoughtfully.

'It wasn't nine who found the Treasure, Assassin,' smiled de Sable. The life force was seeping fast from him now. 'Not nine but ten.'

'A tenth? None may live who carry the secret. Give me his name.'

‘Oh, but you know him well. And I doubt very much you’d take his life as willingly as you’ve taken mine.’

‘Who?’ asked Altaïr, but he already knew. He understood what it was now that had been bothering him. The one mystery that had eluded him.

‘It is your master,’ said de Sable. ‘Al Mualim.’

‘But he is not a Templar,’ said Altaïr, still not wanting to believe. Though he knew in his heart it was true. Al Mualim, who had raised him almost as his own son. Who had trained and tutored him. He had also betrayed him.

‘Did you never wonder how he knew so much?’ pressed de Sable, as Altaïr felt his world falling away from him. ‘Where to find us, how many we numbered, what we aspired to attain?’

‘He is the Master of the Assassins …’ protested Altaïr, still not wanting to believe. Yet … it felt as though the mystery was finally solved. It was true. He almost laughed. Everything he knew, it *was* an illusion.

‘*Oui*. Master of lies,’ managed de Sable. ‘You and I just two more pawns in his grand game. And now … with my death, only you remain. Do you think he’ll let you live – knowing what you do?’

‘I’ve no interest in the Treasure,’ retorted Altaïr.

‘Ah … but he does. The only difference between your master and I is that he did not want to share.’

‘No …’

‘Ironic, isn’t it? That I – your greatest enemy – kept you safe from harm. But now you’ve taken my life – and, in the process, ended your own.’

Altaïr took a deep breath, still trying to comprehend what had happened. He felt a rush of emotions: anger, hurt, loneliness.

Then he reached and brushed de Sable’s eyelids closed. ‘We do not always find the things we seek,’ he intoned, and stood, prepared to meet death if the Crusaders wished. Perhaps even hoping they would.

‘Well fought, Assassin,’ came the cry from his right, and he turned to see Richard striding over to the ring, which parted to allow him through. ‘It seems God favours your cause this day.’

‘God had nothing to do with it. I was the better fighter.’

‘Ah. You may not believe in him, but it seems he believes in you. Before you go, I have a question.’

‘Ask it then,’ said Altaïr. He was very weary all of a sudden. He longed to lie in the shade of a palm: to sleep, to disappear. To die, even.

‘Why? Why travel all this way, risk your life a thousand times, all to kill a single man?’

‘He threatened my brothers and what we stand for.’

‘Ah. Vengeance, then?’

Altaïr looked down at the body of Robert de Sable and realized that, no, vengeance had not been on his mind when he had killed him. He had done what he had done for the Order. He gave voice to his thoughts. ‘No. Not vengeance. Justice. That there might be peace.’

‘This is what you fight for?’ said Richard, eyebrows raised. ‘Peace? Do you see the contradiction?’

He swept an arm around the area, a gesture that took in the battle still raging below them, the bodies scattered about the clearing and, last, the still-warm corpse of Robert de Sable.

‘Some men cannot be reasoned with.’

‘Like that madman Saladin,’ sighed Richard.

Altaïr looked at him. He saw a fair and just king. ‘I think he’d like to see an end to this war as much as you would.’

‘So I’ve heard, but never seen.’

‘Even if he doesn’t say it, it’s what the people want,’ Altaïr told him. ‘Saracen and Crusader alike.’

‘The people know not what they want. It’s why they turn to men like us.’

‘Then it falls to men like you to do what is right.’

Richard snorted. ‘Nonsense. We come into the world kicking and screaming. Violent and unstable. It is what we are. We cannot help ourselves.’

‘No. We are what we choose to be.’

Richard smiled ruefully. ‘Your kind … Always playing with words.’

‘I speak the truth,’ said Altaïr. ‘There’s no trick to be found here.’

‘We’ll know soon enough. But I fear you cannot have what you desire this day. Even now that heathen Saladin cuts through my men and I must attend to them. But perhaps, having seen how vulnerable he is, he will reconsider his actions. Yes. In time what you seek may be possible.’

‘You were no more secure than him,’ said Altaïr. ‘Do not forget that. The men you left behind to rule in your stead did not intend to serve you for longer than they had to.’

‘Yes. Yes. I am well aware.’

‘Then I’ll take my leave,’ said Altaïr. ‘My master and I have much to discuss. It seems that even he is not without fault.’

Richard nodded. ‘He is only human. As are we all. You as well.’

‘Safety and peace be upon you,’ said Altaïr, and he left, his thoughts going to Masyaf. Its beauty seemed tainted by what he had learned about Al Mualim. He needed to ride for home. He needed to put things right.

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Masyaf was not as he had left it: that much become clear from the moment he arrived at the stables. The horses pawed and whinnied but there were no stable lads to see to them or to take Altaïr's mount. He ran through the open main gates and into the courtyard, where he was struck by the silence, the complete absence not just of sound but of atmosphere. Here the sun struggled to shine, giving the village a grey, overcast tint. Birds no longer sang. The fountain no longer tinkled and there was none of the hubbub of everyday life. Stalls were set out but there were no villagers hurrying this way and that, talking excitedly or bartering for goods. There were no animal sounds. Just an eerie … nothing.

He stared up the hill towards the citadel, seeing no one. As ever, he wondered if Al Mualim was in his tower, looking down upon him. Could he see him? Then his eye was caught by a lone figure making his way towards him. A villager.

'What's happened here?' Altaïr demanded of him. 'Where is everyone?'

'Gone to see the Master,' said the citizen. It sounded like a chant. Like a mantra. His eyes were glassy, and a rope of drool hung from his mouth. Altaïr had seen that look before. He had seen it on the faces of those in thrall to Garnier de Naplouse. The crazy men – or so he had thought at the time. They had had that empty, glazed look.

'Was it the Templars?' said Altaïr. 'Did they attack again?'

'They walk the path,' replied the villager.

'What path? What are you talking about?'

'Towards the light,' intoned the man. His voice had taken on a singsong quality.

'Speak sense,' demanded Altaïr.

'There is only what the Master shows us. This is the truth.'

'You've lost your mind,' spat Altaïr.

'You, too, will walk the path or you will perish. So the Master commands.'

Al Mualim, thought Altaïr. So it was true. It was all true. He had been betrayed. Nothing was true. 'What has he done to you?' he said to the villager.

'Praise be to the Master, for he has led us to the light …'

Altaïr ran on, leaving the man behind, a solitary figure in the deserted marketplace. He ran up the slopes, coming to the upland, and there found a group of Assassins waiting for him, their swords drawn.

He drew his own, knowing he could not use it. Not to kill anyway. These Assassins, though they meant to kill him, had been brainwashed into doing it. Killing them would breach one of the tenets. He was weary of breaking the Creed. He was never going to do it again. But …

With dead eyes they closed in on him.

Were they in a trance like the others? Would their movements be just as sluggish? He dipped his shoulder and charged them, knocking the first one down. Another grabbed at him, but he caught hold of the Assassin's robe, took a bunch of it in his fist and swung him, knocking down two more of his attackers to make a gap that he was able to run through.

Then, from above, he heard his name being called. Malik was standing on the promontory by the fortress approach. With him were Jabal of Acre and two more Assassins he didn't recognize. He found himself studying them. Had they, too, been brainwashed? Drugged? Whatever it was that Al Mualim was doing?

But no. Malik was waving his good arm, and though Altaïr had never conceived of a day when he might be pleased to see Malik, here it was.

'Altaïr. Up here.'

'You picked a fine time to arrive,' grinned Altaïr.

'So it seems.'

'Guard yourself well, friend,' Altaïr told him. 'Al Mualim has betrayed us.' He was prepared for disbelief, even anger from Malik, who trusted and revered Al Mualim and deferred to him in all matters. But Malik merely nodded sadly.

'Betrayed his Templar allies as well,' he said.

'How do you know?'

'After we spoke I returned to the ruins beneath Solomon's Temple. Robert had kept a journal. Filled its pages with revelations. What I read there broke my heart … But it also opened my eyes. You were right, Altaïr. All along our master has used us. We were not meant to save the Holy Land, but deliver it to him. He must be stopped.'

'Be careful, Malik,' warned Altaïr. 'What he's done to the others he'll do to us, given the chance. You must stay far from him.'

'What would you propose? My blade arm is still strong and my men remain my own. It would be a mistake not to use us.'

'Distract these thralls, then. Assault the fortress from behind. If you can draw their attention away from me, I might reach Al Mualim.'

'I will do as you ask.'

‘The men we face – their minds are not their own. If you can avoid killing them …’

‘Yes. Though he has betrayed the tenets of the Creed, it does not mean we must as well. I’ll do what I can.’

‘It’s all I ask,’ said Altaïr.

Malik turned to leave him.

‘Safety and peace, my friend,’ said Altair.

Malik smiled wryly. ‘Your presence here will deliver us both.’

Altaïr dashed along the barbican to the main courtyard and now he discovered why there had been no villagers in the marketplace. They were all here, crowded into the courtyard, filling it. The whole village surely. They milled around aimlessly, as though barely able to lift their heads. As Altaïr watched, he saw a man and a woman collide, and the woman fall, landing heavily on her backside. Neither acknowledged it, though. No surprise, no pain, no apologies or angry words. The man staggered a little, then moved off. The woman stayed seated, ignored by the other villagers.

Cautiously, Altaïr moved through them towards the tower, struck by the silence, just the sound of dragging feet and the odd murmur.

‘The will of the Master must be obeyed,’ he heard.

‘O Al Mualim. Guide us. Command us.’

‘The world will be cleansed. We will begin anew.’

The new order, he thought, dictated by the Knights Templar, yes, but one Templar above all. Al Mualim.

He came into the entrance hall of the tower, no guards there to greet him. Just the same sense of thick, empty air. As though an invisible mist hung over the entire complex. Looking up he saw that a wrought-iron gate was open. The gate that led to the courtyard and gardens at the rear of the tower. Wisps of light seemed to hang in the air by the portal, as though beckoning him onwards, and he hesitated, knowing that to go through was to play into Al Mualim’s hands. Though, surely, if the Master wanted him dead, he’d already be dead. He drew his sword and ascended the stairs, realizing that he’d instinctively thought of Al Mualim as ‘the Master’ when he was no longer Altaïr’s master. He had ceased to be his master the moment Altaïr had discovered that Al Mualim was a Templar. He was the enemy now.

He stopped at the doorway to the garden. Took a deep breath. What lay on the other side he had no idea, but there was only one way to find out.

33

It was dark in the garden. Altaïr could hear the low babble of a stream and the soothing cascade of a waterfall, but otherwise the air was still. He came to a marble terrace, the surface smooth beneath his boots, and he looked around, squinting at the dark, irregular shapes of trees and pavilions dotted about him.

Suddenly he heard a noise from behind him. The gate slammed shut and there was a clank as though a bolt had been thrown by unseen hands.

Altair spun. His eyes went up and he saw Al Mualim standing on the balcony of his library, looking down at him on the terrace. He held something: the Treasure taken from the Temple Mount, the Piece of Eden. It glowed with a power that painted Al Mualim a dusky orange, which intensified as Altaïr watched.

Suddenly the Assassin was gripped by an incredible pain. He screamed – and found that he was being raised from the ground, imprisoned by a shimmering cone of bright light controlled by the outstretched hand of Al Mualim, the Apple pulsing like a muscle flexing and tensing.

‘What’s happening?’ cried Altaïr, defenceless in the artefact’s grasp, paralysed by it.

‘So the student returns,’ said Al Mualim, evenly. He spoke with a victor’s assurance.

‘I’ve never been one to run,’ returned Altaïr, defiant.

Al Mualim chortled. None of this – none of it – seemed to bother him. ‘Never been one to listen, either,’ he said.

‘I still live because of it.’ Altaïr struggled against his invisible bonds. The Apple pulsed in response and the light seemed to press in on him, restricting him even more.

‘What will I do with you?’ Al Mualim smiled.

‘Let me go,’ snarled Altaïr. He had no throwing knives but, free of these shackles, he could reach the old man in just a few bounds. Al Mualim would have a few last moments to admire his climbing skills before Altaïr slid his blade into his gut.

‘Oh, Altaïr. I hear the hatred in your voice,’ said Al Mualim. ‘I feel its heat. Let you go? That would be unwise.’

‘Why are you doing this?’ asked Altaïr.

Al Mualim seemed to consider. ‘I believed once. Did you know that? I thought there was a God. A God who loved and looked after us, who sent prophets to guide and comfort us. Who made miracles to remind us of his power.’

‘What changed?’

‘I found proof.’

‘Proof of what?’

‘That it is all an *illusion*.’

And with a wave of his hand he released Altaïr from the imprisoning light. Altaïr expected to drop, then realized he had never been suspended at all. Confused, he looked around himself, sensing a new change in the atmosphere, a building of pressure he felt in his eardrums, like the moments before a storm. Above him on the library balcony, Al Mualim was raising the Apple above his head, intoning something.

‘*Come*. Destroy the betrayer. Send him from this world.’

Suddenly figures were appearing around Altaïr, snarling, teeth bared, ready for combat; figures he recognized but found hard to place at first – but then did: they were his nine targets, his nine victims returned from the other life to this one.

He saw Garnier de Naplouse, who stood wearing his blood-stained apron, a sword in his hand, looking at Altair with pitying eyes. He saw Tamir, who held his dagger, his eyes glinting with evil intent, and Talal, his bow over his shoulder, sword in hand. William de Montferrat, who grinned wickedly, drew his weapon and grounded it, biding his time before the attack. Abu’l Nuqoud and Majd Addin were there, Jubair, Sibrand and, last, Robert de Sable.

All of his targets, sent from the world by Altaïr and summoned back to it by Al Mualim so that they might have their revenge.

And they attacked.

Majd Addin he was pleased to dispatch first, for a second time. Abu’l Nuqoud was as fat and comical in his resurrected form as he had been the first time around. He sank to his knees on the point of Altaïr’s sword, but instead of remaining on the ground, he vanished, leaving just a disturbance in the air behind him, a ripple of disrupted space. Talal, de Montferrat, Sibrand and de Sable were the most skilled fighters and, accordingly, they hung back, allowing the weaker among them to go forward first in the hope of tiring Altaïr. The Assassin dashed from the marble terrace and leaped from the ridge, landing on a

second square of decorated marble, this one with a waterfall nearby. The targets followed him. Tamir died screaming at one, two slashes of Altaïr's sword. The Assassin felt nothing. No remorse. Not even gratification at seeing the men die a deserved second death. De Naplouse vanished as the others had, his throat cut. Jubair fell. Talal he grabbed, and the two grappled before Altaïr drove his sword deep into his stomach and he, too, was nothing but an absence. Montferrat was next to go. Sibrand followed him, then de Sable, until once more Altaïr was alone in the garden with Al Mualim.

'Face me,' demanded Altaïr, catching his breath. The sweat poured from him but he knew the battle was far from over. It had only just begun. 'Or are you afraid?'

Al Mualim scoffed. 'I have stood before a thousand men – all of them superior to you. And all of them dead – by my hand.'

With a litheness and athleticism belying his years, he jumped from the balcony, landing in a crouch not far away from Altaïr. He still held the Apple. He clasped it as though he was proffering it to Altaïr and his face was bathed in its light. 'I am not afraid,' said Al Mualim.

'Prove it,' challenged Altaïr, knowing that Al Mualim would see through his ploy – his ploy to bring the traitor close. But if he did – and he surely did – then he cared nothing. He was right. He was unafraid – unafraid because he had the Apple, which was burning even more brightly. Dazzling. The whole of the area was lit up, then just as quickly darkened again. As Altaïr's eyes adjusted he saw copies of Al Mualim appear, as though generated from within the body of the Master himself.

He tensed. He wondered if these copies, like those he had just fought, would be inferior, weaker versions of the original.

'What could I possibly fear?' Al Mualim was mocking him now. (Good. Let him mock. Let him be careless.) 'Look at the power I command.'

The copies came to Altaïr, and once again he was fighting. Once again the garden rang to the chimes of crashing steel – and as the copies fell beneath Altaïr's blade they vanished. Until he was again alone with Al Mualim.

He stood, trying to regain his breath, feeling exhausted now, then once again he was embraced by the power of the Apple, which sparkled and throbbed in Al Mualim's hand.

'Have you any final words?' said Al Mualim.

'You lied to me,' said Altaïr. 'You called Robert's goal foul – when all along it was yours as well.'

'I've never been much good at sharing,' said Al Mualim, almost rueful.

'You won't succeed. Others will find the strength to stand against you.'

At this Al Mualim sighed heavily. ‘And that is why, as long as men maintain free will, there can be no peace.’

‘I killed the last man who said as much.’

Al Mualim laughed. ‘Bold words, *boy*. But just words.’

‘Then let me go. I’ll put words into action.’

Altaïr’s mind was racing now as he searched for something to say that would incite Al Mualim to carelessness.

‘Tell me, Master, why did you not make me like the other Assassins? Why allow me to retain my mind?’

‘Who you are and what you do are entwined too tightly together. To rob you of one would have deprived me of the other. And those Templars had to die.’ He sighed. ‘But the truth is, I did try. In my study, when I showed you the Treasure … But you are not like the others. You saw through the illusion.’

Altaïr’s mind returned to the afternoon when Al Mualim had shown him the Treasure. He had felt its lure then, that was true, but he had resisted temptation. He wondered if he would be able to do so indefinitely. Its insidious powers seemed to work on all who came into contact with it. Even Al Mualim, whom once he had idolized, who had been a father to him, and had been a good man then, fair and just and temperate, concerned only with the well-being of the Order and those who served it – but he had been corrupted. The glow of the Apple cast his face in a ghastly hue. It had done the same to his soul.

‘Illusion?’ said Altaïr, still thinking of that afternoon.

Al Mualim laughed. ‘That’s all anything’s ever been. This Templar Treasure. This Piece of Eden. This Word of God. Do you understand now? The Red Sea was never parted. Water never turned to wine. It was not the machinations of Eris that spawned the Trojan War, but this …’ He held up the Apple. ‘Illusions – all of them.’

‘What you plan is no less an illusion,’ insisted Altaïr. ‘To force men to follow you against their will.’

‘Is it any less real than the phantoms the Saracens and Crusaders follow now? Those craven gods who retreat from this world that men might slaughter one another in their names? They live among an illusion already. I’m simply giving them another. One that demands less blood.’

‘At least they *choose* these phantoms,’ argued Altaïr.

‘Do they? Aside from the occasional convert or heretic?’

‘It isn’t right,’ snapped Altaïr.

‘Ah. Now logic has left you. In its place you embrace emotion. I am disappointed.’

‘What’s to be done, then?’

‘You will not follow me and I cannot compel you.’

‘And you refuse to give up this evil scheme.’

‘It seems, then, we are at an impasse.’

‘No. We are at an end,’ said Altaïr, and perhaps Al Mualim was correct, for he found himself fighting a wave of emotion. Of betrayal and sadness and something he could not quite place at first but then did. Loneliness.

Al Mualim drew his sword. ‘I will miss you, Altaïr. You were my very best student.’

Altaïr watched the years fall away from Al Mualim as he took up position, readying his sword and forcing Altaïr to do the same. He skipped to the side, testing Altaïr’s guard, and Altaïr realized he had never seen him move so quickly. The Al Mualim he knew paced slowly, walked unhurriedly across the courtyard, made slow, sweeping gestures. This one moved like a swordsman – who thrust forward, slashing with his blade. Then, as Altaïr defended, he adjusted the attack to a jab. Altaïr was forced to his toes, his arm bent as he swept his blade back to deflect Al Mualim’s offensive. The move left him off balance and, with the guard on his left side down, Al Mualim saw his chance and came in with a second quick swipe that met its mark.

Altaïr winced, feeling the wound on his hip leak blood, but dared not look. He couldn’t take his eyes from Al Mualim for one second. Opposite him, Al Mualim smiled. A smile that said he had taught the young pup a lesson. He stepped to his side, then feigned an attack, going first one way then the other, hoping to catch Altaïr off guard.

Fighting pain and fatigue, Altaïr came forward with an offensive of his own – taking Al Mualim by surprise, he was pleased to see. But though he made contact – he thought he made contact – the Master seemed to slide away as though transporting.

‘Blind, Altaïr,’ chuckled Al Mualim. ‘Blind is all you’ve ever been. All you’ll ever be.’ Again, he attacked.

Altaïr was too slow to react in time, feeling Al Mualim’s blade slash his arm and crying out with the pain. He couldn’t take much more of this. He was too tired. He was losing blood. It was as though the energy was being slowly drained from him. The Apple, his wounds, his exhaustion: all were combining slowly but surely to cripple him. If he couldn’t turn the battle soon he faced defeat.

But the old man was letting the Apple make him careless. Even as he was gloating Altaïr danced forward and struck again, his swordpoint striking home, drawing blood. Al Mualim shouted in pain, transported then reappeared, snarling and launching his next offensive. Feigning an attack to the left he spun, wielding his sword backhand. Desperately Altaïr fended him off, but was almost sent

reeling, and for some moments the two traded blows, the salvo ending when Al Mualim ducked, sliced upward and nicked Altaïr's cheek, dancing away before the Assassin could respond.

Altaïr launched a counter-attack and Al Mualim transported. But when he reappeared, Altaïr noticed he looked more haggard, and when he attacked it was a little more carelessly. Less disciplined.

Altaïr came forward slicing with his blade, forcing the Master to transport and materialize several feet away. Altaïr saw a new stoop to his shoulders, and his head was heavy. The Apple was sapping Altaïr's strength but was it doing the same to its user? Did Al Mualim know it? How well did the old man understand the Apple? Its power was so great that Altaïr doubted it was possible ever to truly know it.

So. He had to force Al Mualim to use it and so deplete his own energy. With a yell he leaped forward, slashing at Al Mualim, whose eyes went wide with surprise at the sudden vehemence of Altaïr's approach. He transported away. Altaïr came at him the moment he reappeared and Al Mualim's face now wore anger – frustration that the rules of engagement had changed, needing to find the space to adjust.

He materialized further away this time. It was working: he looked even more tired. But he was ready for Altaïr's undisciplined attack, rewarding the Assassin with another bloody arm. Not serious enough to stop him, though: the younger man pushed forward again, forcing Al Mualim to transport. For the last time.

When he reappeared he staggered slightly, and Altaïr could see that he found his sword heavier to hold. As he raised his head to look at Altaïr, the Assassin saw in his eyes that he knew the Apple had been sapping his strength and that Altaïr had noticed.

And, as Altaïr engaged his blade and leaped, driving it deep into Al Mualim with a roar that was part victory and part grief, perhaps Al Mualim's final thoughts were of pride in his former pupil.

'Impossible,' he gasped, as Altaïr knelt astride him. 'The student does not defeat the teacher.'

Altaïr hung his head, feeling tears prick his cheeks.

'You have won, then. Go and claim your prize.'

The Apple had rolled from Al Mualim's outstretched hand. It sat glowing on the marble. Waiting.

'You held fire in your hand, old man,' said Altaïr. 'It should have been destroyed.'

'Destroy the *only* thing capable of ending the Crusades and creating true peace?' laughed Al Mualim. 'Never.'

‘Then I will,’ said Altaïr.

‘We’ll see about that,’ chuckled Al Mualim.

Altaïr was staring at it, finding it difficult to drag his gaze away. Gently he rested Al Mualim’s head on the stone, the old man fading fast now, stood up and walked towards it.

He picked it up.

It was as if it came alive in his hand. As though a huge bolt of energy flowed from it that lit the Apple and travelled up his arm, right into his chest. He felt a great swelling that was uncomfortable at first, then felt life-giving, washing away the pain of battle, filling him with power. The Apple throbbed and seemed to pulse and Altaïr began to see images. Incredible, incomprehensible images. He saw what looked like cities, vast, glittering cities, with towers and fortresses, as though from thousands of years ago. Next he saw machines and tools, strange contraptions. He understood that they belonged in a future not yet written, where some of the devices brought people great joy while others meant only death and destruction. The rate and intensity of the images left him gasping for breath. Then the Apple was enveloped by a corona of light that spread outwards until Altaïr saw that he was looking at a globe, a huge globe, that hung in the still air of the garden, slowly spinning and radiating warm, golden light.

He was entranced by it. Enchanted. It was a map, he saw, with strange symbols – writing he didn’t understand.

Behind him he heard Al Mualim speaking: ‘I applied my heart to know wisdom, and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also was a chasing after wind. For in much wisdom is much grief and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow.’

Now Malik and his men rushed into the garden. With barely a glance at the body of Al Mualim, they stood hypnotized by the Apple. In the distance Altaïr could hear shouting. Whatever spell had been cast over Masyaf was broken.

He readied himself to dash the Apple against the stone, still unable to take his eyes from the spinning image, finding it hard to make his arm heed the command of his brain.

‘*Destroy it!*’ called Al Mualim. ‘*Destroy it as you said you would!*’

Altaïr’s hand trembled. His muscles refused to obey the commands of his brain. ‘I … I can’t …’ he said.

‘Yes, you can, Altaïr,’ gasped Al Mualim. ‘You can. But you won’t.’ With that, he died.

Altaïr looked up from the body of his mentor to find Malik and his men gazing expectantly at him – waiting for leadership and guidance.

Altaïr was the Master now.

Part Three

34

23 June 1257

Sitting in the shade, safely out of the debilitating heat of the Masyaf marketplace, Maffeo asked me, ‘Al Mualim’s garden. Is this the same piece of land where his library is situated?’

‘Indeed it is. Altaïr decided it a fitting spot to use for the care and storage of his work – thousands of journals filled with Assassin learning, knowledge gleaned from the Apple.’

‘So he didn’t destroy it?’

‘Didn’t destroy what?’

Maffeo sighed. ‘The Apple.’

‘No.’

‘Not then or not ever?’

‘Brother, please, don’t hurry our tale to its conclusion. No, Altaïr did not destroy the Apple straight away. For one thing he had to quell the rebellion that erupted immediately after Al Mualim’s death.’

‘There was a rebellion?’

‘Indeed. There was a great confusion in the immediate aftermath of Al Mualim’s death. There were many in the Order who stayed true to Al Mualim. Either they were unaware of the Master’s treachery or they refused to accept the truth, but to them Altaïr was staging a coup and had to be stopped. No doubt they were encouraged in this by certain voices on the fringes.’

‘Abbas?’

I laughed. ‘No doubt. Though one can only imagine Abbas’s internal conflict surrounding the turn of events. His resentment of Al Mualim was as strong if not stronger than his resentment of Altaïr.’

‘And Altaïr quashed the rebellion?’

‘Certainly. And he did so by staying true to the Creed, issuing orders to Malik and those he commanded that none of the rebels be harmed, that not a single man be killed or punished. After he had subdued them, there were no reprisals.

Instead he used rhetoric to show them the way, persuading them first of Al Mualim's guilt and then of his own suitability to lead the Brotherhood. Doing this, he secured their love, their faith and loyalty. His first task as the Order's new leader was a demonstration of the very principles he aimed to instil. He brought the Brotherhood back from the brink by showing it the way.

'That resolved, he turned his attention to his journal. In it he wrote his thoughts about the Order, his responsibility to it, even the strange woman he had encountered at the cemetery. Who had … More than once Altaïr had gone to write the word "captivated", then stopped himself, changing it instead to "interested" him. Certainly she remained in his thoughts.

'Chiefly he had written of the Apple. He had taken to carrying it with him. At nights when he wrote in his journal it remained on a stand beside him, and when he gazed at it he felt a confused mix of emotions: anger that it had corrupted the one he had thought of as father, who had been a great Assassin and an even greater man; fear of it, for he had experienced its power to give and to take; and awe.

' "If there is good to be found in this artefact, I will discover it," ' he wrote, quill scratching. ' "But if it is only capable of inspiring evil and despair, I hope I possess the strength to destroy it." '

Yes, he told his journal, he would destroy the Piece of Eden if it held no good for mankind. Those were the words he wrote. Nevertheless, Altaïr wondered how he would find the strength to destroy the Apple if and when the time came.

The fact was that whoever owned it wielded enormous power, and the Templars would want that power to belong to them. What was more, he wondered, were the Templars hunting for other artefacts? Did they even possess them? After the death of Robert de Sable they had consolidated at Acre port, he knew. Should he attack them there? He was determined that no one else should ever possess the Apple, or any others like it.

Nobody but him.

He mulled over this in his quarters, for too long perhaps, until he became concerned that he was allowing the enemy time to regroup. He called Malik and Jabal to him, placing Malik in temporary command of the Order and informing Jabal that they were to lead a squad riding for Acre port at once, to mount an offensive on the Templar stronghold, kill the plant at the root.

They left shortly afterwards, and as they did so, Altaïr noticed Abbas standing in a doorway at the castle approach, regarding him balefully. Recent events had done nothing to dull the blade of his hatred; it had sharpened to a vicious edge.

35

Night was falling over Acre port, the grey stone harbour bathed in orange, and the last of the sun painting the sea blood red as it melted into the horizon. Water lapped hard at the bulwarks and sea walls, and gulls called from their perches, but otherwise the harbour was empty, strangely so.

Or … this one was at least. As he watched over it and puzzled at the absence of Templar soldiers – in marked contrast to the last time he had been there, when Sibrand's men were all over it, like fleas on a dog – something told Altaïr that any industry was to be found at the other side of the docks, and his concern grew. He'd taken too long making his decision. Was he about to pay for that?

But the harbour wasn't quite empty. Altaïr heard the sound of approaching footsteps and hushed talk. He held up a hand and, behind him, his team came to a halt, becoming still shadows in the dark. He crept along the harbour wall until he could see them, pleased to note that they had moved apart. The first was almost directly beneath him now, holding up his torch and peering into the dark nooks and crannies of the damp harbour wall. Altaïr wondered if his thoughts were of home, of England or France and the family he had there, and he regretted that the man had to die. As he silently leaped from the wall, landing on him and driving the blade deep, he wished there was another way.

'*Mon Dieu,*' sighed the guard, as he died, and Altaïr stood.

Ahead, the second soldier moved along the wet stone of the dock, shining his tar-dripping torch around himself, trying to chase away the shadows and cringing at every sound. He was beginning to tremble with fear now. The scuttling of a rat made him jump and he turned quickly, his torch held aloft, seeing nothing.

He moved on, peering into the gloom, looking back for his companion … Oh, God, where was he? He had been there a moment ago. The two of them had come to the dock together. Now there was no sight of him – no sound of him. The guard began to shake with fear. He heard a whimper and realized it had come from himself. Then from behind came a noise and he wheeled around quickly, just in time to see his death at his heels …

For a moment or so Altaïr knelt astride the dead guard, listening for reinforcements. But none came and now, as he rose to his feet, he was joined by the other Assassins, dropping from the wall and coming on to the harbour, like him dressed in white robes, peering black-eyed from beneath their cowls. With hardly a sound, they spread out, Altaïr issuing hushed orders and indicating for them to move silently and swiftly along the harbour. Templar guards came running and were dealt with, Altaïr moving among them, leaving the fight to his team and coming to a wall. Worry gnawed at his gut: he had timed the attack badly – the Templars were already on the move. A sentry tried to stop him, but with a slash of Altaïr's blade he was falling, blood spurting from his open neck. The Assassin used his body as a springboard, scrambling to the top of the harbour wall and crouching there, looking over at the adjacent dock, then out to sea.

His fears were realized. He'd waited too long. Ahead of him, on a Mediterranean Sea golden with the dying light of the sun, there was a small fleet of Templar ships. Altaïr cursed and moved quickly along the harbour into the heart of the docks. From behind him he could still hear the sounds of battle as his men were met by reinforcements. The Templar evacuation continued but he had an idea that the key to their departure might be found within the stronghold itself. Carefully, quickly and silently he made his way to the fortress, which loomed darkly over the docks, remorselessly disposing of the few guards he came across, wanting to disrupt the enemy's escape as much as he wanted to learn of its intent.

Inside, the grey stone absorbed the sound of his footsteps. Templars were notable for their absence here. The place already had an empty and disused feel. He climbed stone stairways until he came to a balcony and there he heard voices: three people in the middle of a heated conversation. One voice in particular he recognized as he took up position behind a pillar to eavesdrop. He had wondered if he would ever hear it again. He had hoped he would.

It was the woman from the graveyard in Jerusalem; the brave lioness who had acted as de Sable's stand-in. She stood with two other Templars and, from her tone, was displeased.

'Where are my ships, soldier?' she snapped. 'I was told there would be another fleet of eight.'

Altaïr glanced over. The Templar ships were silhouetted on the horizon.

'I'm sorry, Maria, but this is the best we could do,' replied one of the soldiers.

Maria. Altaïr savoured her name even as he admired the set of her jaw, the eyes that shone with life and fire. Again he noticed that quality about her – as though she kept most of her true self back.

‘How do you propose to get the rest of us to Cyprus?’ she was saying.

Now, why would the Templars be relocating to Cyprus?

‘Begging your pardon, but it might be better if you stayed in Acre,’ said the soldier.

Suddenly she was watchful. ‘What is that? A threat?’ she asked.

‘It’s fair warning,’ replied the knight. ‘Armand Bouchart is Grand Master now and he doesn’t hold you in high regard.’

Armand Bouchart, noted Altair. So it was he who had stepped into de Sable’s shoes.

At the centre of the balcony, Maria was bridling. ‘Why, you insolent …’ She stopped herself. ‘Very well. I’ll find my own way to Limassol.’

‘Yes, milady,’ said the soldier, bowing.

They moved away, leaving Maria alone on the balcony where, Altaïr was amused to hear, she began talking to herself. ‘Damn … I was a single heartbeat from knighthood. Now I’m little more than a mercenary.’

He moved towards her. Whatever he felt about her – and he felt *something*, of that much he was certain – he needed to speak to her. Hearing him approach, she spun round and recognized him instantly. ‘Well,’ she said, ‘it’s the man who spared my neck, but stole my life.’

Altaïr had no time to wonder what she meant because with a flash of steel, as swift as a lightning bolt, she’d drawn her sword and was coming at him, attacking him with a speed, skill and courage that impressed him anew. She swapped sword hands, spun to attack him on his weak side, and he had to move fast to defend. She was good, better than some of the men in his command, and for some moments they traded blows, the balcony resounding to the ring and clash of steel, punctuated by her shouts of effort.

Altaïr glanced behind to make sure no reinforcements were arriving. But then again, of course they wouldn’t. Her people had left her behind. Clearly her closeness to de Sable had done her no favours with his replacement.

On they fought. For a heartbeat she had him with his back to the balustrade, the dark sea over his shoulder and for the same heartbeat he wondered whether she could best him and what a bitter irony that might be. But her desperation to win made her careless and Altaïr was able to come forward, eventually spinning and kicking her feet from beneath her, then pouncing on her with his blade held to her throat.

‘Returned to finish me off?’ she said defiantly, but he could see the fear in her eyes.

‘Not just yet,’ he said, though the blade stayed where it was. ‘I want information. Why are the Templars sailing to Cyprus?’

She grinned. ‘It’s been a long, dirty war, Assassin. Everyone deserves respite.’

He fought a smile. ‘The more you tell me, the longer you live. So I ask again, why the retreat to Cyprus?’

‘What retreat? King Richard has brokered a truce with Salah Al’din, and your Order is leaderless, is it not? Once we recover the Piece of Eden, *you*’ll be the one running.’

Altaïr nodded, understanding. Knowing, too, that there was much about the Order the Templars presumed to know but did not. The first thing being that the Assassins had a leader, the second that they were not in the habit of running from Templars. He stood and pulled her to her feet. Glaring at him, she brushed herself down.

‘The Apple is well hidden,’ he told her, thinking that in fact it was not. It remained in his quarters.

‘Altaïr, consider your options carefully. The Templars would pay a great price for that relic.’

‘They already have, haven’t they?’ said Altaïr, leading her away.

Moments later, he had gathered with his Assassins, the battle on the harbour over, Acre port theirs. Among them was Jabal, who raised his eyebrows at the appearance of Maria and waved for two Assassins to take her away before he joined Altaïr.

‘What’s happening on Cyprus that would concern the Templars?’ mused Altaïr, as they strode along. He had already decided their next destination and there was no time to waste.

‘Civil strife, perhaps?’ said Jabal, palms spread. ‘Their emperor Isaac Comnenus picked a fight with King Richard many months ago, and now he rots in a Templar dungeon.’

Altaïr thought. ‘A pity. Isaac was so easily bent, so willing to take a bribe.’

They stopped at the harbour steps and Maria was led past them, her chin held high.

‘Those days are past,’ Jabal was saying. ‘Now the Templars own the island, purchased from the King for a paltry sum.’

‘That’s not the kind of governance we want to encourage. Have we any contacts there?’ asked Altaïr.

‘One in Limassol. A man named Alexander.’

‘Send him a message,’ said Altaïr. ‘Tell him to expect me within the week.’

36

He sailed to Cyprus alone – although not *quite* alone. He took Maria. He had told Jabal that he could use her as Templar bait, but he wrote in his journal that he liked to have her with him; it was as simple and as complicated as that. There had been too few women in his life. Those who shared his bed had done little more than satisfy a need, and he had yet to meet a woman able to stir those feelings found above waist height. Had he met her now? He scratched the question in his journal.

Arriving in Limassol they discovered that the Templars had occupied the island in earnest. As ever the port was soaked in the orange light of the sun and the sandstone shone with it; the blue waters glittered and the gulls wheeling and swooping above their heads kept up a constant noise. But everywhere there were the red crosses of the Templars, and watchful soldiers eyeing a begrudging populace. They lived under the iron gauntlet of the Templars now, their island sold from beneath them by a king whose claim to it was tenuous at best. Most carried on with their lives; they had mouths to feed. A few plucky souls had formed a Resistance, though. It was they who would be most sympathetic to Altaïr's mission, they he planned to meet.

He made his way from his ship and along the docks. With him came Maria, her hands bound. He'd made sure she had removed any signs identifying her as a Templar Crusader and, to all intent and purposes, she was his slave. This situation, of course, angered her and she wasn't slow to make it known, grumbling as they passed through the docks, which were quieter than expected. Altaïr was privately amused by her discomfort.

'What if I started screaming?' she said, through gritted teeth.

Altaïr chuckled. 'People would cover their ears and carry on. They've seen an unhappy slave before.'

But what people? The docks were strangely empty, and as they came up into the back-streets, they found the highways deserted too. Suddenly a man stepped out of an alley in front of them, wearing scruffy robes and a turban. Disused barrels and the skeletons of empty crates lay about, and from somewhere they

could hear water dripping. They were alone, Altaïr realized, just as two more men stepped out of other alleys around them.

‘The port is off-limits,’ said the first man. ‘Show your face.’

‘Nothing under this hood but an ugly old Assassin,’ growled Altaïr, and he raised his head to regard the man.

The thug smirked, a threat no longer, grinning. ‘Altaïr.’

‘Alexander,’ said Altaïr, ‘you got my message.’

‘I assumed it was a Templar trap. Who is the woman?’ He looked Maria up and down, a twinkle in his eye.

‘Templar bait,’ explained Altaïr. ‘She was de Sable’s. Unfortunately she’s a burden.’

Maria fixed him with a gaze: if looks could kill, it would have tortured him viciously first.

‘We can hold her for you, Altaïr,’ said Alexander. ‘We have a secure safe-house.’

She cursed their rotten souls as they made their way to it, such coarse language for an English woman.

Altaïr asked Alexander why there were so few citizens on the streets.

‘Quite a ghost town, eh? People are afraid to leave their homes for fear of breaking some obscure new law.’

Altaïr thought. ‘The Templars have never been interested in governing before. I wonder why now.’

Alexander was nodding. As they walked, they passed two soldiers, who looked at them suspiciously. Altaïr steeled himself against Maria giving them away. She didn’t, and he wondered whether it had anything to do with her having been abandoned by her own side in Acre. Or perhaps … No. He put that thought out of his mind.

They reached the safe-house, a derelict warehouse that Alexander had made his base. There was a storeroom sealed with a barred wooden door but they let Maria remain in the open for the moment; Altaïr checked the rope at her wrists, running a finger between it and her arm to make sure she was comfortable. Now she gave him a look of what he could only describe as appreciative disdain.

‘I won’t assume you’re here out of charity,’ said Alexander, when they were settled. ‘May I ask your purpose?’

Altaïr wanted to act quickly – he wanted to move in on the Templar base at once – but he owed the Cypriot an explanation. ‘It’s a complicated story, but can be summed up easily: the Templars have access to knowledge and weapons far deadlier than anyone could have imagined. I plan to change this. One such

weapon is in our hands. A device with the ability to warp the minds of men. If the Templars possess more like it, I want to know.'

Maria piped up from behind them: 'And we can certainly trust the Assassins to put the Apple, the Piece of Eden, to better use …'

Altaïr suppressed a smile but ignored her, saying to Alexander, 'Where are the Templars holed up now?'

'In Limassol Castle, but they're expanding their reach.'

That had to be stopped, thought Altaïr.

'And how do I get inside?' he asked.

Alexander told him about Osman, a Templar whose sympathies lay with the Cypriot Resistance. 'Kill the captain of the guard,' he said. 'With him dead it's likely Osman will be promoted to the post. And if that happens, well, you could walk straight in.'

'It's a start,' said Altaïr.

As he moved through the streets of the city he marvelled at how quiet it was. As he walked, he thought of Maria and the Apple. He had brought it with him, of course – it remained in the cabin of his ship. Had it been foolish, perhaps, to bring the Treasure into such close proximity with the enemy? Only time would tell.

At the marketplace he located the Templar captain of the guard, who had kindly made himself easy to spot, wearing a red tunic over chainmail and looking as imperious as a king. Altair looked around, seeing other guards in the vicinity. He lowered his head, drawing no attention to himself, avoiding the gaze of a guard who watched him with narrowed, suspicious eyes. When he passed on, he did so looking for all the world like a scholar. Then, very carefully, he began to work his way around, manoeuvring himself to the rear of the captain, who stood at the other end of the lane, barking orders at his men. Apart from the captain and now his killer, the lane was empty.

Altaïr took a throwing knife from the sheath at his shoulder, then, with a flick of his wrist, set it free. The captain sank to the stone with a long groan, and by the time the guards came running, Altaïr had taken an adjoining alley and was melting into the empty side-streets. His task fulfilled, he had now to go in search of Osman, just as Alexander had instructed.

Stealthy and fast, he made his way across the rooftops of the sun-bleached city, scuttling catlike across the wooden beams, until he found himself overlooking a courtyard. There below him was Osman. A Templar, he nevertheless had Assassin sympathies, and Altaïr waited until he was alone before lowering himself into the courtyard.

As he did so, Osman looked from Altaïr to the wall above them, then back again, regarding his visitor with amused eyes. At the very least he had a high regard for the Assassin's stealth.

'Greetings, Osman,' said Altaïr. 'Alexander sends his regards, and wishes your grandmother a joyous birthday.'

Osman laughed. 'The dear lady, may she rest in peace. Now, how may I help you, friend?'

'Can you tell me why the Templars purchased Cyprus? Was it to set up another exchequer?'

'I don't rank high enough to know for certain, but I have heard talk of an archive of some kind,' said Osman, as he looked left, then right. If he was seen talking to Altaïr he would almost certainly be put to death in the market square.

'An archive? Interesting. And who is the ranking Templar in Limassol?'

'A knight named Frederick the Red. He trains soldiers in Limassol Castle. A real brute.'

Altaïr nodded. 'With the castle guard dead, what would it take to get me inside?'

'Assuming I'm appointed to his position, I could find an excuse to reduce the castle watch for a short time. Would that work?"

'I'll make it,' said Altaïr.

Things were moving quickly.

'Osman is making the arrangements,' he told Alexander later, back at the safe-house. While he'd been out, Maria had spent much of the day in the storeroom where she had kept Alexander entertained with a string of insults and wisecracks, her infuriation only increasing when he had asked her to repeat them, a fan of her English diction. Now, however, she had been allowed out to eat and sat on an unsteady wooden chair, glaring at Altaïr and Alexander, who sat talking, and shooting angry glances at any other Resistance men who happened to pass through.

'Excellent. Now what?' said Alexander.

'We give him some time,' said Altaïr. He turned to Maria. 'He also told me about the Templar archive. Have you heard of such a thing?'

'Of course,' said Maria. 'That's where we keep our undergarments.'

Altaïr despaired. Turning back to Alexander, he said, 'Cyprus would be a good location to safeguard both knowledge and weapons. With the right strategy, it's an easy island to defend.'

He stood. Osman would have had time to clear the castle walls by now. It was time to infiltrate the castle.

37

A short while later he found himself in the courtyard of Limassol Castle, ready for the infiltration. Staying in the shadows, he looked up at the forbidding stone walls, noting the arches that were guarded and timing the movements of the men on the ramparts.

He was pleased to note that there were just a few men: Osman had done his work well. The fortress wasn't completely insecure but Altaïr could get in. And that was all he needed.

He scaled a wall to the ramparts, then crept into the castle. A guard screamed and fell, one of Altaïr's throwing knives in his neck. Another heard the commotion and came running along the hallway, only to meet the Assassin's blade. Altaïr lowered the guard to the stone, placed his foot to his back and retrieved his blade, which dripped blood to the floor. Then he continued making his way through the sparsely inhabited castle, disposing of guards when he saw them. Osman really *had* done his job efficiently. Not only had there been fewer guards on the walls but there seemed to be an absence of men inside as well. Altaïr ignored the uncertainty that formed in his gut. The twinge of disquiet.

Up and up he went, further and further into the castle's inner sections until he came to a balcony overlooking a large courtyard used as a training square.

There he saw Frederick the Red, a huge, bearded giant presiding over a duel between two of his men. The sight of him made Altaïr smile. The genial spy Osman had been right. Frederick the Red was indeed a brute of a man.

'No mercy, men,' he was roaring. 'This is an island of superstitious heathens. Remember, they do not want you here, they do not like you, they do not understand the true wisdom of your cause, and they are scheming at every turn to cast you out. Stay on your guard, and trust no one.'

Both in full armour, the two knights battled it out, the sound of their swords ringing around the yard. Staying out of sight on the balcony above, Altair listened to the Templar leader as he spurred them on.

'Find the chinks in your opponent's armour. Strike hard. Save your celebrations for the tavern.'

Now Altaïr stood and took a step up to the wall, in plain sight of the three men in the training yard below. Still they remained engrossed in the battle. He gauged the height from where he stood to the stone below, then took a deep breath, stretched out his arms and jumped.

With a soft thump he landed directly behind Frederick the Red, his knees bent, arms out for balance. The bearded leader turned as Altaïr straightened. Eyes blazing, he roared, 'An Assassin on Cyprus? Well, well. How quickly you vermin adapt. I'll put an end to –'

He never finished his sentence. Altaïr, who had wanted to look into the Templar's eyes before he delivered the killing blow, engaged his blade and sliced his neck in one movement, the entire action over in the blink of an eye. With a short, strangulated sound, Frederick the Red crumpled, his neck a gaping red hole and his blood flooding over the stone around him, truly living up to his name.

For a second his men stood silent, their helmets robbing them of any emotion so that Altaïr could only picture the looks of shock behind the steel. Then they recovered – and attacked. Altaïr drove his blade through the eye slit of the first. From behind the helmet there was an agonized choking noise and blood leaked from the visor as the swordsman fell. Then the second of the two duellists struck, wielding his broadsword more in hope than expectation of finding his target. The Assassin sidestepped easily, palming a throwing knife at the same time, then twisting and, in a single motion, ramming upwards with his knife under the knight's chestplate.

Battle over, the three corpses settled on the stone, and Altaïr looked around the yard catching his breath. The castle, being so lightly populated, had its advantages, he thought. He returned to the balcony, letting himself out as he had come in. On his return journey the nagging voice of doubt grew louder. Most of the bodies he passed were those he had left earlier, still undisturbed, and there were no sentries at all now. *None*. Where was everybody?

He got his answer shortly after he had left the fortress and made his way across the rooftops to the safe-house, already looking forward to resting and perhaps some verbal jousting with Maria. Maybe even a little conversation with her. All he'd been able to glean from her so far was that she was English, that she had been de Sable's steward (exactly what *that* meant, Altaïr hadn't asked) and that she had become involved in the Crusades after an incident at home in England. That had intrigued him. He hoped to find out soon what had happened to her.

Suddenly he saw smoke, a thick pillar darkening the sky.

And it was coming from the safe-house.

His heart was hammering as he drew closer. He saw Crusader soldiers standing guard and keeping back anyone trying to get near to the building, which was burning. Fingers of flame reached from the windows and the door, dense curls of black smoke crowning the roof. This was why Frederick's castle has been so poorly guarded.

Altaïr's first thought was not for the safety of the Order, Alexander or any of the other Resistance men who might have been inside. His first thought was for Maria.

Fury ripped through him. He snapped his wrist to eject his blade. In one movement he had leaped down from the rooftop and met two of the Templar guards below. The first died shouting, the second had time to turn, with wide, surprised eyes, as Altaïr's blade opened his throat. The shout went up and more soldiers came running, but Altaïr fought on, desperate to reach the safe-house, not knowing whether Maria was trapped inside, perhaps choking to death. Had she been left in the storeroom? Was she in there now, pounding on the door, gasping for air in the smoke-filled room? If so, he could only begin to imagine the terror she must be feeling. More Templar guards came to him, their swordpoints eager for blood. And he fought on. He battled them with throwing knives and sword until he was exhausted, the street was littered with Templar corpses, bleeding into the dirt, and he was rushing towards the now smouldering safe-house, calling her name.

'*Maria!*'

There was no answer.

More Templars were approaching now. With a heavy heart Altaïr fled to the rooftops, there to take stock and plan his next move.

38

As it turned out, his next move was decided for him. Sitting high in a tower in the shade of a bell, Altaïr had become aware of movement in the streets, which had been so empty. People were leaving their homes. He had no idea where they were going, but decided he wanted to know.

Sure enough, with the smoke was still rising from the charred remains of the safe-house, the Templars were mobilizing. Altaïr used the roofs to follow townspeople as they made their way to the square and saw the expressions they wore, overheard their conversations. Talk was of revenge and reprisals. More than once he heard Armand Bouchart's name. Bouchart had just arrived on the island, they said. He had a fearsome reputation. A cruel reputation.

Altaïr was about to see that reputation in action, but for the time being he was overjoyed to see Maria in the crowd, alive and unharmed. She was flanked by two Templar knights in the gathering crowd – their prisoner by the look of it, though she wasn't bound. Like everybody else in the square, her attention was fixed on the steps of the cathedral.

He kept her in his eyeline, staying out of sight on a rooftop overlooking the square, watching as Osman took up position on the steps, standing slightly to one side, ready for the entrance of Armand Bouchart, the new Templar leader, who strode out and joined him.

Like de Sable before him, Bouchart seemed to have been chosen for his formidable appearance as much as his leadership ability. He wore full armour but looked strong and lithe beneath it. He was hairless with a thick brow that seemed to shade his eyes. Sunken cheeks gave his face a cadaverous look.

'A foul murder has shaken my order,' he bellowed, in a voice that commanded the whole square's attention. 'Dear Frederick the Red … slain. He, who served God and the people of Cyprus with honour, is paid tribute by a murderer's blade. Who among you will deliver those responsible to me?'

There was nothing from the crowd but the sound of awkward shuffling. Altair's eyes went back to Bouchart, who was darkening. 'Cowards!' he roared. 'You leave me no choice but to flush out this killer myself. I hereby grant my men immunity until this investigation is concluded.'

Altaïr saw Osman shift uncomfortably. Usually his face wore a twinkly look, but not now. He seemed worried as he stepped forward to speak to the leader. ‘Bouchart, the citizens are already restless. Perhaps this is not the best idea.’

Bouchart’s face was turned away so Osman might not have seen it twist into an expression of terrible fury. Bouchart was not accustomed to having his orders questioned: that was clear. As to whether he considered it insubordination or not …

In one movement he drew his sword and rammed it into Osman’s stomach.

With a shout that echoed around the stunned square, the captain folded to the stone, cradling his belly. He writhed on the steps briefly until he died, his death rattle deafening in the shocked hush that blanketed the crowd. Altaïr winced. He hadn’t known Osman, of course, but what he’d seen of him, he’d liked. Another good man had died a needless death.

Bouchart reached down and wiped his sword clean on the arm of Osman’s tunic. ‘If anyone else objects, I invite you to step forward.’

The body shifted slightly and one arm came loose, hanging over the step. Osman’s sightless eyes stared at the sky.

There were no objections.

Suddenly there was a shout from Maria, who had pulled free of her two captors. She ran to the steps and threw herself to her knees in front of the leader. ‘Armand Bouchart,’ she called.

Though he smiled in recognition, it was not the smile of friends meeting. ‘Ah,’ he sneered, ‘an old colleague,’ and he replaced his sword in his belt.

‘Bouchart,’ said Maria, ‘an Assassin has come to Cyprus. I managed to escape, but he cannot be far behind.’

Up on his perch, Altaïr’s heart sank. He’d hoped … No. She was a Templar first. She always would be. Her loyalty was to them.

‘Why, Maria,’ said Bouchart in high spirits, ‘that would make this your second miraculous escape from the Assassins, no? Once when de Sable was the target, and now here on my island.’

Altaïr watched incomprehension join panic on Maria’s face. ‘I am not in league with the Assassins, Bouchart,’ she blurted. ‘Please listen.’

‘De Sable was a weak-willed wretch. Verse seventy of the founding Templar Rule *expressly* forbids consorting with women … for it is through women that the devil weaves his strongest web. De Sable ignored this tenet and paid with his life.’

‘How dare you?’ she retorted and, despite himself, Altaïr smiled. Any fear Maria experienced was always short-lived.

‘Touched a nerve, did I?’ roared Bouchart, enjoying himself. Then, ‘Lock her up.’

And with that the meeting was over. Bouchart turned and left, leaving the glassy-eyed body of Osman on the steps behind him. Maria was bound and dragged away.

Altair’s eyes went from the receding figure of Bouchart to Maria. He was torn, trying to decide on his next course of action. Bouchart was close. He might not have this chance again. Strike at him when he least expected it.

But then again – Maria.

He let himself down from the rooftop and followed the men as they led her out of the Cathedral Square, presumably towards the gaol. He kept at a safe distance. Then, when they’d turned off into a quieter street, he struck.

Moments later the two guards were dead and Altaïr was approaching Maria where she had been tossed aside, her hands still bound, struggling to get to her feet. He reached for her and she jerked away from him. ‘Get your hands off me,’ she snapped. ‘They consider me a traitor, thanks to you.’

Altaïr smiled indulgently – even though she had alerted Bouchart to his presence. ‘I am only a convenient excuse for your wrath, Maria. The Templars are your real enemy.’

She glowered. ‘I will kill you when I get the chance.’

‘If you get the chance … but then you’ll never find the Apple, the Piece of Eden. And which would curry more favour with the Templars right now? My head or that artefact?’

She looked at him with narrowed eyes, seeing that what he said made sense. She seemed to relax.

For the time being.

Much later they met Alexander again. His face showed his concern as he told Altaïr, ‘Despite his bravado, Bouchart obviously took Maria’s warning seriously.’ At this he shot Maria a look so furious that, unusually, she was lost for words. ‘My sources tell me that after destroying our safe-house he immediately sailed for Kyrenia.’

Altaïr frowned. ‘That’s a shame. I was hoping to meet him.’ He planned to meet him still. ‘What’s the fastest route there?’ he asked.

39

They travelled as a monk and his companion, able to find space in the hold. Occasionally crew members would descend from the main deck and curl up to sleep there, too, farting and snuffling, paying little attention to the two strangers. As Maria slept, Altaïr found a crate and opened his journal, bringing the Apple out from a pack he wore in his robe.

Free of its swaddling it glowed and he watched it for a moment, then began to write: ‘I struggle to make sense of the Apple, the Piece of Eden, its function and purpose, but I *can* say with certainty that its origins are not divine. No … it is a tool … a machine of exquisite precision. What sort of men were they who brought this marvel into the world?’

There was a noise behind him. In an instant he had swept up the Apple and covered it once more, hiding it within his robe. It was Maria, stirring from sleep. He closed his journal, stepping over the sleeping bodies of two crew members and crossing the hold to where she sat with her back against a stack of wooden boxes, shivering and yawning. She clasped her knees to her chest, watching as Altaïr sat on the deck beside her. Her eyes were unreadable. For a moment they listened to the creak of the ship, the suck and slap of the sea on the hull. Neither was sure if it was day or night, or how long they had been sailing.

‘How did you find yourself here?’ he asked her.

‘Don’t you remember, holy man?’ she said archly. ‘You brought me.’ She whispered, ‘I’m your consort.’

Altaïr cleared his throat. ‘I mean here in the Holy Land. In the Crusades.’

‘I should be at home with a lap full of crochet and one eye on the gardener?’

‘Isn’t that what English women do?’

‘Not this one. I’m what they call the unusual one in my family. Growing up, I always preferred the boys’ games. Dolls weren’t for me, much to my parents’ continued exasperation. I used to pull their heads off.’

‘Your parents?’

She laughed. ‘My dolls. So, of course, my parents did everything they could to make me less boisterous, and on my eighteenth birthday they gave me a special present.’

‘And what was it?’

‘A husband.’

He started. ‘You’re married?’

‘I was. His name was Peter, and he was a most pleasant companion, just …’

‘What?’

‘Well, that was it. Just … most pleasant. Nothing else.’

‘So, not much use as a playmate.’

‘In no sense. My ideal husband would have embraced those aspects of my character that my parents wanted to excise. We would have gone hunting and hawking together. He would have tutored me in sports and combat and imbued me with learning. But he did none of those things. We repaired to his family seat, Hallaton Hall, in Leicestershire, where as chatelaine I was expected to manage the staff, oversee the running of the household and, of course, produce heirs. Three at least. Two boys and a girl, preferably, in that order. But I failed to live up to his expectations as miserably as he had failed to live up to mine. The only thing I cared for less than the hierarchies and politics of the staff was child-rearing and especially the birth that comes beforehand. After four years of prevarication I left. Fortunately the Bishop of Leicester was a close friend of the elderly Lord Hallaton and he was able to grant an annulment rather than risking this silly impetuous girl cause the family further embarrassment. I was of course *persona non grata* at Hallaton Hall – indeed, in the whole of Leicestershire – and, returning home, the situation was no better. Hallaton had demanded his bride price back but Father had already spent it. In the end I decided it was best for everyone if I left so I ran away to the Crusade.’

‘As a nurse?’

‘No, as a soldier.’

‘But you’re …’

‘Adept at disguising myself as a man, yes. Did I have you fooled that day in the cemetery?’

‘I knew you weren’t de Sable, but …’

‘You didn’t anticipate me being a woman. You see? Years of being boisterous finally paid off.’

‘And de Sable? Was he fooled?’

Altaïr sensed her rueful smile, rather than seeing it. ‘I liked Robert at first,’ she said softly. ‘He certainly saw more of my potential than Peter did. But, of course, he also saw how I might be exploited. And it wasn’t long before he was doing so.’ She sighed. ‘It was fitting that you killed him,’ she said. ‘He was not a good man and was unworthy of whatever feelings I had for him.’

‘Did he give you that?’ said Altaïr after a time, indicating her hand, the gem that shone there.

She looked at and frowned, almost as though she had forgotten she was wearing it. ‘Yes. It was a gift from him when he took me under his wing. This is all I have left of my ties to the Templars.’

There was an awkward silence. Eventually it was broken by Altaïr, who said, ‘Did you study philosophy, Maria?’

She looked at him dubiously. ‘I’ve read scraps … nothing more.’

‘The philosopher Empedocles preached that all life on earth began simply, in rudimentary forms: hands without arms, heads without bodies, eyes without faces. He believed that all these early forms combined, very gradually over time, to create all the variety of life we see before us. Interesting?’

She all but yawned. ‘Do you know how ludicrous that sounds?’

‘I do … but I take comfort in the advice of the philosopher Al Kindi: one must not be afraid of ideas, no matter their source. And we must never fear the truth, even when it pains us.’

‘I don’t see the point of your ramblings.’ She laughed softly, sounding sleepy and warm.

Perhaps he had misjudged her. Maybe she wasn’t ready to learn. But just then a bell sounded, the sign that they had docked at Kyrenia. They stood up.

Altaïr tried again. ‘Only a mind free of impediment is capable of grasping the chaotic beauty of the world. This is our greatest asset.’

‘But is chaos something to be celebrated? Is disorder a virtue?’ she asked, and something in him lifted at the question. Perhaps she was receptive to higher knowledge, after all.

‘It presents us with challenges, yes,’ he said, ‘but freedom yields greater rewards than the alternative. The order and peace the Templars seek require servility and imprisonment.’

‘Hm,’ she said. ‘I know that feeling …’

He felt a certain closeness towards her as they reached the steps that led to the upper deck and realized it was the very sensation he had been chasing almost since they had met. Now he had it, he liked it. He wanted to keep it. Even so, he should be careful. Hadn’t she already told him that she planned to kill him? Her loyalties to the Templars had been torn but that didn’t mean she had suddenly come over to the way of the Assassin. As far as he could tell, her way was the way of Maria.

So it was to prove.

At the ladder she smiled and held out her hands and he regarded them distrustfully. But she couldn’t possibly climb with her hands tied and, anyway,

they were travelling with pirates: although pirates were notoriously low on ethics, even they might be surprised by a monk who kept his companion bound. The two who had been sleeping were now pulling themselves to their feet, yawning, scratching their groins and casting looks across the hold at the pair of them. Surreptitiously Altaïr flicked out his blade and sliced the rope at her wrists. She shot him a grateful look before beginning to climb the ladder.

Then, he heard something. A murmur. He was alerted more by the tone than what was being said. Without making it obvious, he listened. As he'd thought, the two pirates were talking about them.

'I *knew* it was him,' rasped one. 'I told you.'

Altaïr could feel their eyes on his back.

'I'll bet the Templars would pay a handsome reward for those two.'

Silently the Assassin cursed. If he was right, he'd be needing his blade again at any moment …

He heard the sound of scimitars being drawn.

… *now*.

Altaïr wheeled to face the two men as his companion decided to pursue the Way of Maria and launched a bid for freedom, kicking out with her trailing foot and sending him stumbling against the side of the hold, pain flaring in his face.

There was pain inside him, too. A different kind of pain.

Then she was gone, disappearing into the square of sunlight at the hold door. Altaïr cursed again but aloud this time and righted himself to meet the attack. The first pirate grinned as he came forward, thinking no doubt of the bounty – the wine and women he would buy when he had collected it.

Altaïr thrust his sword through the man's sternum and he stopped grinning, sliding wetly off the blade. It gave the second pause for thought and he stopped. His eyes narrowed and he swapped his weapon from hand to hand. Altaïr smiled at him and stamped, pleased to see him flinch in response.

Good, he thought. He liked his mercenary pirates to be a little scared before they died.

And die he did. The pirate's eyes rolled up as Altaïr buried his blade in his side then sawed quickly to the front, opening a vast gash in his flank as he dropped to the deck, joining his companion. Now the Assassin scaled the ladder and then he was blinking in the sunlight as he found himself on the main deck, casting his eyes around in search of his escapee. Pirates, alerted by the sudden presence of Maria, came running. A shout went up as they saw Altaïr and realization dawned on them. He dashed across the deck, ducking beneath rigging, then running nimbly down the gangplank and on to Kyrenia docks, desperately looking for a place to hide where he could let the threat go by.

And then, he thought angrily, he was going to find Maria. This time he wouldn’t allow her to escape.

He looked around. Another city held by the Templars. It twinkled in the sun. Somehow it was too beautiful to be in the hands of the enemy.

40

At least finding Maria caused him no difficulty. Trouble came to her like rats to a ship's hold. Sure enough when Altaïr next crossed paths with her, pirate corpses were strewn at her feet and three local men were standing nearby, flicking blood from their swords and recovering their breath after battle. They tensed as Altaïr appeared and he held up his hands in a gesture of good faith, taking in the scene: Maria, the men, the dead bodies.

Once again, it seemed, she'd had a lucky escape.

'I thought I'd seen the last of you,' he said to her, arms still upraised.

She had a gift for refusing to be surprised at any turn of events. 'If only I were so lucky…'

He frowned at her, then addressed one of the Cypriot men, the likely leader. 'What is your business with this woman? Are you a Templar lackey?'

'No, sir,' stammered the man. He stood with his sword drawn and Altaïr's hands were empty, but even so, the Cypriot knew a skilled warrior when he saw one. 'The pirates attacked her and I had to help. But I'm no lackey. I hate the Templars.'

'I understand. You're not alone,' replied Altaïr.

The man nodded gratefully, their common purpose established. 'My name is Markos, sir. I'll help in any way I can, if it means ridding my country of these Crusaders.'

Excellent, thought Altaïr. 'Then I need you to keep this woman safe until I return. I have to find someone before the Templars do.'

'We'll be at the harbour all day. She'll be safe here with us,' said Markos, and once again Maria was grumbling as the men hauled her away. She'd be all right, thought Altaïr, watching them go. She'd spend the day between a couple of burly Cypriots, watching the world go by in Kyrenia harbour: there were better ways to waste a few hours, but also far worse. At least he knew she'd be safe while he met with Alexander's Resistance contact, the Barnabas he'd been told about.

He found him at the safe-house, which doubled as a grain store. Walking in, Altair had called out cautiously, hearing nothing but the scuttling of mice and the distant sounds of the street. Then a man had appeared from among the sacks. He

had a dark beard and watchful black eyes, and introduced himself as Barnabas. When Altaïr asked him if the safe-house had an area that could be used as a cell, he smiled obsequiously and assured him that of course it did, but then dithered, going first to one door, which he opened and closed, and then to a second, through which he peered before announcing that the drying room had a barred area that could be used as a cell.

'I've been following Armand Bouchart,' Altaïr told Barnabas, moments later, the two of them now sitting on grain sacks in the storeroom.

'Ah … Bouchart is in Kyrenia?' said the Resistance man. 'He's probably visiting his prisoners in Buffavento.'

'Is that a keep nearby?'

'A castle, yes. It was once the residence of a wealthy Cypriot noblewoman, until the Templars seized her property.'

Altaïr frowned at their greed. 'Can you take me there?'

'Well … I can do more than that. I can get you inside without the guards batting an eyelid. But you must do something for me first. For the Resistance.'

'A familiar request,' said Altaïr. 'What is it?'

'We have a traitor in our midst,' said Barnabas, darkly.

The traitor was a merchant named Jonas, and after Barnabas had given him the necessary details Altaïr tracked him to an amphitheatre in the centre of the city. According to Barnabas, Jonas was feeding secrets to the Templars. Altaïr watched him for a while, meeting other tradesman, looking for all the world like any other businessman. Then, when he turned to go, the Assassin followed him from the amphitheatre and into the back-streets, noting as the merchant slowly became aware that he was being followed. He cast more and more frequent glances behind him at Altaïr, his eyes wilder and more frightened each time. Suddenly he broke into a run and Altaïr was in pursuit, delighted to see Jonas turn into an alleyway.

He speeded up, and raced after his quarry.

The alleyway was empty.

Altaïr stopped, glanced behind to check he was not seen, then – *snick* – engaged his blade. He took two steps forward so that he was level with a large, unsteady pile of crates, which was teetering slightly. He bent slightly, then drove his blade through a crate. The wood splintered and there was a scream. The pile toppled down on to Altaïr, who braced himself, almost losing his footing.

He stayed still, though. And when the wood had settled around him he relaxed, looking along the line of his outstretched arm, to where Jonas was pinned by his blade, blood slowly spreading from the wound at his neck. Still in the crouched position he'd adopted to hide, the merchant cut a desperate,

pathetic figure. And though Altaïr knew he was a traitor, and that information he gave to the Templars had no doubt been used to kill, capture and torture members of the Resistance, he pitied him, so much so that he removed the blade gently, shoving aside the remnants of the boxes so that he could lay Jonas down and bend to him.

Blood oozed from the neck wound. ‘What’s this?’ wheezed Jonas. ‘An Assassin? Does Salah Al’din have his eyes on poor Cyprus too?’

‘The Assassins have no ties to the Saracen. Our business is our own.’

Jonas coughed, revealing bloodied teeth. ‘Whatever the case, word of your presence is widespread. The Bull has put a bounty on your head … and on the head of your female companion.’

Altaïr saw the life bleeding out of him. ‘I’m worth more and more every day,’ he said, and delivered the killing blow.

When he stood up, it was not with the satisfaction of a job well done, but with a terrible sense that something was amiss. The Bull Jonas had mentioned. Whoever he was, he was loyal to Armand Bouchart and he knew of Altaïr and Maria’s presence in Kyrenia. Was that the source of Altaïr’s disquiet?

He took to the rooftops, meaning to find Markos and Maria at once.

‘Well, Maria, it seems there’s a hefty price on both our heads,’ said Altaïr, when he’d found her. Just as he’d imagined, she was sitting on a stone bench between Markos and another Resistance man, wearing the glowering look to which he was becoming accustomed.

‘A price? Damn Bouchart. He probably thinks I’m your apprentice.’

‘Someone called the Bull has dispatched his men to search for us.’

Maria jumped as though stung. ‘The Bull? So they gave that zealot his own parish?’

‘Is he a friend of yours?’ said Altaïr, wryly.

‘Hardly. His name is Moloch. He’s a pious blowhard with arms like tree trunks.’

Altaïr turned to Markos. ‘Do you know the Resistance safe-house in the Commons District?’

‘I know where it is, but I’ve never been inside.’ Markos shrugged. ‘I’m just a foot soldier for the Resistance.’

Altaïr thought, then said, ‘I can’t be seen with Maria, so you’ll have to take her. Keep her out of sight, and meet me there when you’re safe.’

‘I know some back alleys and tunnels.’

‘It may take longer, but we’ll get her there in one piece.’

Separately they made their way to the safe-house, Altaïr arriving first. Barnabas had spread out sacks of grain and had been relaxing, but he pulled himself to his feet as Altaïr entered, stifling a yawn as though roused from slumber.

'I just had word that someone found poor Jonas's body,' he said, with a sneer in his voice. 'What a waste, eh?' He brushed grain from his robes.

'You knew him better than I did,' replied Altaïr. 'I'm sure he understood the risk of working for both sides.' He looked at Barnabas carefully, taking note of the crooked smile he wore. Altaïr took no pleasure from death – any death – and he was apt to look poorly on those who did, whether they be Templar, Assassin or Resistance. On the one hand Barnabas was an ally. On the other … If Altaïr knew one thing it was to trust his instincts and his instincts were nagging him now; just a low, hushed nagging, but insistent nonetheless.

Barnabas was continuing: 'Yes … unfortunately, this has complicated things. Jonas was a respected Cypriot and his death has sparked riots near the Old Church. The public is hungry for revenge and the Bull will tell them you were responsible. You may lose the support of the Resistance.'

What? Altaïr stared at him, hardly able to believe his ears. That instinct of his: it moved from nagging to outright harassment. 'But Jonas was a traitor to the Resistance. Did they not know?'

'Not enough of them, I'm afraid,' Barnabas admitted. 'The Resistance is quite scattered.'

'Well, you'll have the chance to tell them yourself,' said Altaïr. 'Some men are on their way to us now.'

'You're bringing people here?' Barnabas looked concerned. 'People you can trust?'

'I'm not sure who I can trust right now,' said Altaïr, 'but it's worth the risk. Right now I need to see these riots for myself.'

'As for our bargain, I'll see what I can do about getting you close to Bouchart. A deal's a deal, eh?' said Barnabas. He smiled again.

Altaïr didn't care for that smile. He liked it less and less each time he saw it.

41

Altaïr paid a visit to the church and his heart sank at the sight of the unrest. Templar guards had formed a cordon and were holding back marauding citizens, who had been prevented from moving out of the immediate area of the church and were smashing everything in sight. Crates and barrels had been splintered and there were scattered fires on the streets. Streetside stalls had been attacked and dismantled, and the smell of trampled produce mingled with the smoke. Men had gathered in groups and were chanting slogans to the beat of drums and the constant rattle of cymbals, trying to goad the lines of Templar knights, who watched them carefully from behind makeshift barriers, overturned carts and stalls. Every now and then small squads of soldiers would make short, ruthless sorties into the mob, dragging out men who kicked and yelled, and either clubbing them with the hilts of their swords or throwing them behind the barrier to be taken to the cells – not that their raids did anything to frighten the rioters or dampen their temper.

Altaïr watched it all from up high, squatting on the edge of a roof, shrouded in despair. Something had gone wrong. Something had gone terribly wrong. And if the Bull decided to make an announcement naming him as the killer, then things were going to get even worse.

He made his decision. The Bull had to die.

When he arrived back at the safe-house, he looked in vain for Barnabas, who was nowhere to be seen. Now Altaïr was certain that he had been wrong to trust him and was cursing himself. He'd listened to his instinct. Just not hard enough.

Markos was there, though, as was Maria, who had been deposited in the cell, a much sturdier design than the makeshift gaol they had been using in Limassol. The door between the drying room and the storeroom was open so they could see her: she sat behind bars with her back against the wall, occasionally kicking her feet among the rushes spread out on the floor and regarding all goings-on with a baleful, sardonic expression. Altaïr watched her, musing upon all the trouble she had caused.

He learned that she, Markos and several other Resistance men had arrived at the safe-house to find it deserted. Barnabas had been gone when they had got

there. How convenient, thought Altaïr.

‘What’s going on out there?’ Markos had exclaimed. ‘The city is in turmoil. I’ve seen riots.’

‘The people are protesting the death of a citizen, a man named Jonas. Have you heard of him?’

‘My father knew him well. He was a good man. How did he die?’

Altaïr’s heart sank even further, and he found himself avoiding Markos’s eyes as he replied, ‘Bravely. Listen, Markos, things have become complicated. Before I find Bouchart, I need to eliminate the Bull and put an end to his violence.’

‘You’ve quite a taste for chaos, Altaïr,’ called Maria from her cell.

He liked the way his name sounded in her mouth. ‘The Bull is one man responsible for the subjugation of thousands. Few will mourn his loss.’

She shifted. ‘And you propose to fly into Kantara, sting him and exit unnoticed? He surrounds himself with devoted worshippers.’ Her voice echoed in the stone prison.

‘Kantara … that’s to the east?’ said Altaïr, picking up on her inadvertent slip.

‘Yes, it’s the best defended … You’ll see for yourself.’

42

Altaïr did indeed see for himself. Kantara Castle was guarded by Crusader soldiers and Moloch's fanatics. Scaling the walls, then making his way across the ramparts, he stopped occasionally to hear them talking, gleaning the odd bit of information about the man they called the Bull. He learned that he was a religious zealot who attracted like-minded followers, fanatics who either worked as his personal bodyguard, his servants, or who trod the streets of Kyrenia, spreading the word. He was attached to the Templars. His devotion to their leader, Bouchart, was almost as devout as his religious faith, and Kantara Castle was his personal citadel, given to him, presumably, by the Templars. He was known to spend most of his time worshipping at the castle chapel.

Which was where Altaïr hoped to find him.

Moving through the fortress he saw fanatics as well as guards. The fanatics looked … well, exactly as he would have expected fanatics to look: jumpy, wide-eyed and zealous. They were held in open contempt by the Christian guards who patrolled in twos and clearly thought it beneath them to be stationed at the castle. As Altaïr pressed himself into a recess two wandered past, one complaining to the other. 'Why do the Templars tolerate this madman? The Bull and his fanatics are more dangerous than the citizens of Cyprus.'

'The Templars have their reasons,' replied the other. 'It's much easier for them to rule by proxy, you see.'

'I suppose so. But how long can it last? The Bull and the Templars do not exactly see eye to eye on matters of faith.'

'Ah, the less you say about that the better,' rejoined the first.

Altaïr let them go past, then moved on, the corridor darkening. Maria had said the castle was well defended, and it certainly was if you had raised an army and planned to storm its walls. For a lone Assassin, though, penetrating the fortress by stealth was an easier task. Especially when you were the Master. When you were Altaïr.

Now he found himself in a vast banqueting hall. At the opposite end stood two guards and he took out two throwing knives. He flicked them: one, two. In

moments the men lay twitching on the stone and Altaïr stepped over them, knowing that he was near now, that Moloch couldn't be far away.

He wasn't. Altaïr came to what looked like a dead end and turned, checking behind him – why had this been guarded? Then he saw a trapdoor. Bending to it, he listened, then smiled. He had found the Bull.

Very gently he lifted the trapdoor and lowered himself into the roof beams below. He was in the rafters of the castle's place of worship, a large empty room lit by the fire of a large brazier near the altar.

Kneeling before the fire, tending it, was Moloch.

Maria's description of him had been accurate. He was a bear of a man: bare-headed, drooping moustache, bare-chested, apart from a medallion, and with the tree-trunk arms she'd described. Sweat glistened on him as he stoked the fire, chanting an incantation that sounded as much like a growl as it did pious devotion. Absorbed in his work he didn't move from the fire, didn't look away from it, bathing his face in the heat of the flames, oblivious to anything else in the room, even – especially – his killer.

Good. Moloch looked strong, easily more powerful than Altaïr, who had no desire to engage him in combat. Not only did he have the muscular advantage but it was said that he wielded a weapon like a meteor hammer, with a deadly weight attached to a chain. It was said that he used it with unfailing accuracy, and was ruthless with it.

So, no. Altaïr had no desire to engage him in combat. This was to be a stealth kill. Quick, clean and silent.

Noiselessly, Altaïr made his way along the beams, then dropped silently into the centre of the room behind Moloch. He was slightly further away than he would have liked and he held his breath, tensing. If Moloch had heard him …

But no. The brute was still engrossed with the brazier. Altaïr took a few steps forward. Silently he engaged the blade and raised it. Orange light danced on the steel. The Bull now just a heartbeat away from death. Altaïr dipped slightly, his leg muscles bunching, then launched himself, blade about to strike.

He was in mid-air when Moloch spun, far more quickly than his size should have allowed. At the same time he grinned and Altaïr realized that he had known he was there all along; that he had merely let Altaïr come close. Then the Assassin was in the embrace of those huge arms, raising him off the ground, feeling a hand go to his throat and squeeze.

For a moment or so he was held that way, Moloch lifting him one-handed into the air as though he were a trophy to be displayed on the castle steps, and he choked as he struggled. His feet kicked at thin air and his hands scrabbled at Moloch's gauntlet, desperately trying to loosen the monster's grip. His vision

began to cloud, blackness closing in. He felt himself losing consciousness. Then Moloch was tossing him backwards and he was sprawling on the chapel floor, his head rebounding painfully off a flagstone, wondering why he had been allowed to live.

Because the Bull wanted more sport. He had produced his meteor hammer and, with a single looping swing above his head, launched it at Altaïr, who only just managed to roll clear as it came smashing down, opening a crater in the flagstone and showering him with stone shards.

Altaïr scrambled to his feet, dazed, shaking his head to clear it. He drew his sword. Blade in one hand, sword in the other. He was darting to the side as the Bull retrieved his hammer and launched it again.

It crashed into a pillar beside Altaïr and once again he was hit by a hail of stone fragments. With Moloch's hammer unspooled, Altaïr had a chance and darted in, jabbing with sword and blade. But, faster than seemed possible, Moloch had retrieved the chain and held it two-handed, blocking Altaïr's sword, then swinging the hammer again and sending the Assassin diving for safety once more.

Altaïr thought of Al Mualim – the Al Mualim who had trained him, not the traitor he had become. He thought of Labib and of his other swordskills tutors. He took a deep breath and backed off, stepping to the side, circling Moloch.

The Bull followed him, knowing he had the Assassin worried. When he smiled he revealed a mouthful of jagged, blackened teeth, most worn down to diseased stumps. From the back of his throat he made a growling sound as Altaïr came closer, needing to coax Moloch into throwing the hammer. The Assassin had an idea. It was a good idea but it had a flaw. It would be fatal if he got it wrong. He needed the Bull to release the hammer – but every time that happened it came dangerously close to caving in Altaïr's skull.

It came. Looping through the air. Smashing into the stone. Altaïr only just leaped clear but he landed on his feet and, instead of taking cover, dashed towards the hammer. He stepped on the weight and ran up the taut chain towards Moloch.

Moloch stopped grinning. He had a second to comprehend the sight of the agile Assassin running up the tightrope of his chain before Altaïr's sword sliced through the front of his throat and exited at the neck. He made a sound that was halfway between a shout and a choke, the sword protruding through his neck as Altaïr let go of the hilt and twisted to straddle the Bull's shoulders, driving his blade deep into the man's spine. Still the Bull fought and Altaïr found himself hanging on for grim life. He grabbed the chain and dragged it up to loop around his victim's neck with his free hand, grunting with the effort of pulling it hard.

Moloch twisted and pushed backwards and Altaïr saw that he was being manoeuvred towards the fire.

He felt the heat at his back and redoubled his efforts. The beast would not die. He smelt something burning – the hem of his robe! Yelling with pain and effort, he pulled hard on the chain with one hand, digging the blade deeper with the other until at last something gave, some last life force snapped within Moloch and Altaïr was riding his bucking shoulders as the brute folded to the floor where he lay, breathing heavily, syrupy blood spreading across the stone, slowly dying.

At last his breathing stopped.

Altaïr heaved a huge sigh of relief. Moloch would not be able to turn the people against the Resistance. His reign of tyranny was over. However, he couldn’t help but wonder what might replace it.

He was to get his answer very shortly.

43

Maria was gone. Taken by Crusaders. While Altaïr had been battling at Kantara Castle, soldiers had attacked the safe-house and, despite a battle, had made off with some prisoners, Maria among them.

Markos, one of the few who had escaped capture, was there to greet the Assassin, worry etched into his face, fretting as he babbled, 'Altaïr, we were attacked. We tried to fight them off but – but it was no use.' He dropped his eyes, shame-faced.

Or was he feigning it?

Altaïr looked at the door to the drying room. It was open. Beyond, the door to the barred cell hung open too and he pictured her there, watching him with her almond eyes, her back against the wall and boots scuffing in the rushes strewn on the stone.

He shook his head to rid himself of the image. There was more at stake than his feelings for the English woman: he had no business thinking of her before the concerns of the Order. But … he had.

'I wanted to stop them,' Markos was saying, 'but I had to hide. There were too many.'

Altaïr looked at him sharply. Now that he knew of Barnabas's duplicity he was reluctant to trust anybody. 'This was not your fault,' he said. 'The Templars are crafty.'

'I've heard they harness the power of a Dark Oracle in Buffavento. That must be how they found us.'

Was that so? Altaïr thought about it. Certainly the Templars seemed to know their every move. But maybe that was less to do with an oracle and more to do with the fact that the Resistance was infested with Templar spies.

'That is a curious theory,' he said, wary that Markos might be trying deliberately to mislead him. 'But I suspect it was Barnabas who tipped them off.'

Markos started. 'Barnabas? How can that be? The Resistance leader Barnabas was executed the day before you arrived.'

Of course. Altaïr cursed himself. There *had been* a Barnabas who was loyal to the Resistance but the Templars had replaced him with their own man – a false

Barnabas. Altaïr thought of Jonas, executed by him on the orders of the spy, and he hoped one day to be able to make recompense for that. Jonas hadn't deserved to die.

Altaïr left for the harbour district, found where the Resistance prisoners were being held and slipped past the guards to discover them huddled in a cramped, filthy cell.

'Thank you, sir, may God bless you,' said one, as Altaïr opened the door and allowed him out. He wore the same look of gratitude as the others. Altaïr hated to think what the Templars had planned for them.

He searched the gaol in vain for Maria …

'Was there a woman with you when you were taken?'

'A woman? Yes, until the Bull's son Shalim took her away in chains. She didn't go quietly.'

No, thought Altaïr. Going quietly wasn't Maria's style. But who was this son, Shalim? Would he take over the Bull's reign of tyranny?

So it was that Altaïr found himself scaling the walls of the fortress at Buffavento, making his way into the castle, then downwards into its dark, damp and dripping depths where the stone glistened blackly, where the lights from flickering torches barely penetrated the forbidding darkness, where every footstep echoed and there was the constant drip of water. Was this where the Templars kept their famous oracle? He hoped so. All he knew so far was that they were keeping one step ahead of him. Whatever they had in mind, he knew he wouldn't like it: he didn't like the idea of the archive he kept hearing about, or that they kept coming so close to crushing the Resistance. Anything he could do to halt their progress needed to be done. And if that meant a spot of witch-hunting, then so be it.

Now, edging along the corridors in the bowels of the castle, he found himself coming closer to what he assumed was the dungeon. Behind him lay the bodies of two guards he had encountered on his way, both with their throats slit, the corpses hidden from view. Just as with Moloch's castle, he had been able to work his way to its heart using a mixture of stealth and killing. Now he heard voices, one of which he recognized immediately. It was Bouchart's.

He was talking to a man on the other side of a steel gate pockmarked with rust.

'So the girl escaped again, did she?' snapped the Templar.

The other man wore sumptuous fur-lined robes. 'One minute she was chained up, the next she was gone …'

'Don't insult me, Shalim. Your weakness for women is well known. You let your guard down and she walked away.'

‘I will find her, Grand Master. I swear it.’

So this was Shalim. Altaïr paid him special attention, faintly amused. Nothing about him – not his looks, his build and certainly not his attire – was reminiscent of his father, Moloch.

‘Do it quickly,’ Bouchart was snapping, ‘before she leads the Assassin directly to the archive.’

Shalim turned to go, but Bouchart stopped him. ‘And, Shalim, see that this is delivered to Alexander in Limassol.’

He handed Shalim a sack that the other man took, indicating his assent. Altaïr felt his jaw clench. So Alexander was working with the Templars too. The enemy seemed to have a hand in everything.

Now, though, the two men had moved off, and Altaïr resumed his progress towards the Oracle’s cell. Unable to pass through the gates, he clambered on to a balcony and worked his way round the outside of the fortress, then downwards again until he came to the dungeons. More guards fell beneath his blade. Soon the bodies would be discovered and there would be a general alert. He needed to move quickly.

Still, it seemed as though the guards had enough to contend with. He could hear screaming and ranting as he approached what he thought were the dungeons. As he came to the end of a tunnel, which opened into what looked like a gaol area, he realised where Bouchart had been going, because here he was again, talking to a guard. They stood on the other side of a barred partition outside a row of cell doors.

Well, thought Altaïr, at least he’d found his dungeon. He crouched out of sight in an alcove in the tunnel. To a background of shrieks, he heard Bouchart ask, ‘What’s happening?’

‘It’s that mad woman, sir,’ replied the guard, raising his voice to be heard over the din. ‘She’s on a rampage. Two of the guards are injured.’

‘Let her play,’ smiled Bouchart. ‘She has served her purpose.’

Yet again Altaïr found the way between himself and Bouchart blocked. He would dearly have liked to finish this now, even with the guard present: he thought he could overwhelm the man first, then take Bouchart. But it was not to be. Instead he was forced to watch, frustrated, as Bouchart and the guard moved off, leaving the area deserted. He came from out of his hiding place and went to the partition, finding a locked gate. Dextrous fingers worked at the mechanism. Then he passed through, and strode towards the door of the Oracle’s cell. If anything, her screaming was louder and more unsettling now, and Altaïr swallowed. He was frightened of no man. But this was no man. This was something different altogether. He found himself having to steady his nerves as

he worked on the second lock. As the door swung open, with the high-pitched complaint of rusting hinges, his heart was hammering.

Her cell was vast, the size of a banqueting hall – a large banqueting hall over which hung the pall of death and decay, with rippling mist and what looked like patches of foliage among the pillars, as though the outside was intruding, one day to claim it in full.

As his eyes became accustomed to the gloom he looked for her but saw nothing, just heard her infernal screeching. It made the hairs on his arms stand on end and he suppressed a shiver as he trod further into her … cell?

This was more like her lair.

Suddenly there was silence. His senses pricked. He swapped his sword from hand to hand, eyes scanning the dark, dimly lit room.

'Pagan blood,' came a voice – a jagged singsong voice straight from a nightmare. He wheeled in the direction of the sound, but then it came again and seemed to have moved. 'I know your name, sinner,' she cackled, 'I know why you're here. God guide my claws. God grant me strength to snap your bones.'

Altaïr just had time to think, *Claws*? Did she really have – She appeared, whirling like a dervish from the darkness, black hair whipping about her, screaming as she came. What she had weren't quite claws: they were long, sharp nails – and just as deadly. He heard their whistle as they sliced in front of his face. He jumped back. Then she was crouching like a cat, looking at him and snarling. He was surprised: he had expected an aged crone, but this woman … she had noble looks. Of course. It was the woman Barnabas had told him about, who had once lived in the castle. She was young and had been attractive once. But whatever the Templars had done to her, imprisonment had seemingly sent her mad. He knew that when she grinned, suddenly not so noble as she revealed rows of rotting teeth and a tongue that threatened to loll from her mouth. Giggling she struck once more.

They fought, the Oracle attacking blindly, swinging her nails, slashing Altaïr several times and drawing blood. He kept his distance, coming forward to launch counter-attacks until eventually he managed to overwhelm her and pinned her to a pillar. Desperately he tried to hold her – he wanted to reason with her – but she writhed like a wild animal, even when he pushed her to the ground and straddled her, holding his blade to her throat as she thrashed, muttering, 'Glory of God. I am his instrument. God's executioner. I fear neither pain nor death.'

'You were a Cypriot once,' Altaïr told her, struggling to hold her. 'A respected noblewoman. What secrets did you tell those devils?'

Did she know that by helping the Templars she'd betrayed her own people? Did she still have enough reason to understand that?

‘Not without purpose do I deal in misery,’ she rasped, suddenly becoming still. ‘By God’s command I am his instrument.’

No, he thought. She didn’t. Her mind was gone.

‘Whatever the Templars have done to you, my lady, they have done you wrong,’ he said. ‘Forgive me this.’

It was an act of mercy. He killed her, then fled that terrible place.

Later, back at the safe-house, he opened his journal and wrote,

> *Why do our instincts insist on violence? I have studied the interactions between different species. The innate desire to survive seems to demand the death of the other. Why can they not stand hand in hand? So many believe the world was created through the works of a divine power – but I see only the designs of a madman, bent on celebrating death, destruction, and desperation.*

He mused also upon the Apple:

> *Who were the Ones That Came Before? What brought them here? What drove them out? What of these artefacts? Messages in a bottle? Tools left behind to aid and guide us? Or do we fight for control over their refuse, giving divine purpose and meaning to little more than discarded toys?*

44

Altaïr decided to follow Shalim. Now they were both hunting Maria, and Altaïr wanted to make sure he was around if Shalim found her first.

Not that Shalim was looking especially hard at the moment. Markos had told Altaïr that all Shalim had in common with his father was the fact that he served the Templars and had a fierce temper. In place of religious fervour he had a taste for wine and enjoyed the company of prostitutes. Following him, Altaïr saw him indulge in both. He kept a safe distance as Shalim and two of his bodyguards stalked the streets of Kyrenia like a trio of little despots, angrily upbraiding citizens and merchants, abusing them, taking goods and money in preparation for a visit somewhere.

To a brothel, it seemed. Altaïr watched as Shalim and his men approached a door where a drunk was pawing one of the local whores. Either the man was too stupid or too inebriated to recognize that Shalim's mood was dark, because he lifted his leather flask in greeting to the tyrant, calling, 'Raise a mug, Shalim.'

Shalim did not break stride. He rammed the flat of his hand into the drunk's face so that his head rebounded off the wall behind him with a hollow clunk. The leather flask dropped and the man slid down the wall to a sitting position, his head lolling, hair matting with blood. In the same movement Shalim grabbed the prostitute by the arm.

She resisted. 'Shalim, no. Please don't.'

But he was already dragging her off, looking back over his shoulder and calling to his two companions, 'Have your fun, men. And round up some women for me when you're finished.'

Altaïr had seen enough. Shalim wasn't looking for Maria, that much was certain, and he himself wasn't likely to find her by following Shalim to wherever he was going with his whore: bed or a tavern, no doubt.

Instead he returned to the market district, where Markos was aimlessly wandering between the stalls, his hands clasped behind his back, waiting for news from Altaïr.

'I need to get close to Shalim,' he told Markos, when they'd repaired to the shade, looking for all the world like two traders passing the time of day out of

the hot sun. ‘If he is as stupid as he is brash, I may be able to get some secrets out of him.’

‘Speak to one of the monks near the cathedral.’ Markos chuckled. ‘Shalim’s wayward lifestyle demands frequent confessions.’

So it was that at the cathedral Altaïr found a bench beneath a flapping canopy and sat watching the world go by, waiting until a lone white-robed monk passed him, inclining his head in greeting. Altaïr returned the gesture, then said in a low voice, so that only the monk could hear, ‘Does it not trouble you, brother, to suffer the sins of such a vile man as Shalim?’

The monk stopped. Looked one way then the other. Then at Altaïr. ‘It does,’ he whispered, ‘but to oppose him would mean death. The Templars have too much at stake here.’

‘You mean the archive?’ said Altaïr. ‘Can you tell me where it is?’

Altaïr had heard about this archive. Perhaps it held the key to the Templars’ activities. But the monk was shaking his head and moving away as, suddenly, a small commotion erupted. It was Shalim, Altaïr saw, with a start. He was mounting an orator’s platform. He no longer had the prostitute with him and he seemed a good deal less drunk than he had been previously.

‘Men and women of Cyprus,’ he announced, as his audience assembled, ‘Armand Bouchart sends his blessing, but with a stern provision that all who foment disorder with their support of the Resistance will be caught and punished. Those who seek order and harmony, and pay obeisance to the Lord through good work, will enjoy Bouchart’s charity. Now, let us work together as brothers to rebuild what hate and anger have torn down.’

This was most odd, thought Altaïr. Shalim looked rested and fresh-faced, not how Altaïr would have expected him to appear in view of his recent activities. That Shalim had had all the makings of a man who planned to spend the rest of his day drinking and whoring. This one? He was like a different man – not just in looks but in his manner, his bearing and, judging by the content of his speech, his entire philosophy. And this Shalim had no bodyguards with him either. This Shalim Altaïr could easily overcome, perhaps in one of the alleyways off a main avenue of Kyrenia.

When Shalim stepped down from his platform and moved off, leaving the cathedral behind him and taking to the golden streets, Altaïr followed in pursuit.

He wasn’t sure how long they’d been walking when suddenly the giant St Hilarion Castle was looming over them and he saw that Shalim was heading inside. Sure enough, when he reached the huge castle gates he stepped inside a wicket door, disappearing from sight. Altaïr cursed. He had lost his target. Still, the castle was a hive of activity, and even now the doors were opening, both

gates swinging back to allow a palanquin carried by four men to come out. It was clearly empty – they were able to jog along quickly – and Altaïr followed them to the sun-dappled harbour where they set down their burden and stood waiting, their arms folded.

Altaïr waited too. He took a seat on a low harbour wall and sat with his elbows on his knees, watching the palanquin and the waiting servants, the merchants and fishermen, the beautiful ships rocking gently in the wash, hulls knocking against the harbour wall. A group of fishermen wrestling with a huge net stopped suddenly, looked over to one of the ships and grinned. Altaïr followed their gaze to see a number of women appear in the sheer silk and chiffon of courtesans and make their way on to the harbour with self-conscious, dainty steps. The fishermen leered and some washerwomen tutted as the women crossed the dock with their heads held high, knowing exactly the attention they commanded. Altaïr watched them.

Among them was Maria.

She was dressed as a courtesan. His heart lifted to see her. But what was she doing? She had escaped Shalim's clutches only to step back into danger, or so it seemed. She and the other women climbed aboard the palanquin. The servants waited until they were aboard, then picked it up and turned with it, carrying it much more slowly than before, each man bent beneath its weight, heading out of the harbour and, if Altaïr was right, towards St Hilarion Castle. Where, no doubt, Shalim was already rubbing his hands with glee.

Altaïr turned to follow, scaling the wall of a nearby building, then making his way across the roofs, jumping from one to another, tracking the palanquin, which was below him. As it approached the castle gates he waited, crouching. Then, timing his jump, he dropped on to its roof.

Thump.

The palanquin lurched as the men below adjusted to the new weight. Altaïr had gambled on them being too tyrannized even to look up – and he had been right. They merely shouldered the extra weight and walked on. And if the courtesans inside had noticed, they said nothing either, and the procession crossed safely over the castle threshold and came into a courtyard. Altaïr looked around him, seeing archers on the ramparts. Any moment now he'd be spotted. He dropped off and hid behind a low wall, watching as Maria was taken from the transport and escorted away, leaving the courtyard by a small door.

He scrambled up to the roof of an outhouse. He would have to make his way inside the long way round. But one thing he knew. Now he'd found her he wasn't going to lose her again.

45

On a wide, baking-hot balcony, Maria was ushered in to meet the owner of St Hilarion Castle. One of them, at least. Unknown to Altaïr, Shalim had a twin brother, Shahar. It was Shahar whom Altaïr had seen delivering the speech on charity, which would have answered the Assassin's question as to how a man who had spent the evening drinking and whoring could look so invigorated the next day.

Maria, on the other hand, was acquainted with both twins and, though they were identical, knew how to differentiate them. Of the two Shalim was dark-eyed and bore the looks of a man with his lifestyle; Shahar seemed the more youthful of the two. It was him she approached now. He turned to face her and lit up, smiling, as she crossed the balcony towards him, resplendent in her courtesan's outfit, fetching enough to catch any man's eye.

'I didn't expect to see you again.' He leered. 'How can I help you, little fox?'

He walked past her and back into the hall.

'I'm not here to be flattered,' snapped Maria, despite appearances to the contrary. 'I want answers.'

She stayed at his heels, and when they reached the hall, he eyed her, bemused yet lecherous. She ignored his look. She needed to hear for herself what Altaïr had told her.

'Oh?' said Shahar.

'Is it true what I have heard,' she pressed, 'that the Templars wish to use the Apple, the Piece of Eden, for ill? Not to enlighten the people, but to subdue them?'

He smiled indulgently as though explaining things to an adorable but simple-minded child. 'People are confused, Maria. They are lambs begging to be led. And that's what we offer: simple lives, free of worry.'

'But our Order was created to protect the people,' she persisted, 'not to rob them of their liberty.'

Shahar curled his lip. 'The Templars care nothing for liberty, Maria. We seek order, nothing more.'

He was walking towards her. She took a step back. 'Order? Or enslavement?'

His voice had taken on a darker tone as he replied, ‘You can call it whatever you like, my dear …’

He reached for her, his intentions – his all-too obvious intentions – interrupted only by Altaïr bursting into the room. Shahar wheeled, exclaiming, ‘*Assassin!*’ He grabbed Maria by the shoulders and tossed her to the floor – she landed painfully. Altaïr decided he would make the bully pay for that.

‘My apologies, Shalim, I let myself in,’ he said.

Shahar grinned. ‘So you’re looking for Shalim? I’m sure my brother would be happy to join us.’

From above there was a noise and Altaïr looked up to a gallery where Shalim was approaching, smiling. Then two guards came through the open door, ready to pounce on Maria who, standing now, whirled, snatched one guard’s sword from its sheath and used it against him.

He screamed and crumpled just as she spun and, dropping to one knee, thrust again, disposing of the other. In the same moment Shalim bounded down from the gallery, landing in the middle of the hall next to his brother. Altaïr had a moment to see the two side by side, and was amazed by how close in looks they were. Next to him stood Maria, her newly acquired sword dripping with blood, shoulders heaving, the two of them against the twins. Altaïr felt his chest fill with something that was partly pride and partly something he preferred not to name. ‘Two of them,’ he said, ‘and two of us.’

Yet again, however, Maria sprang a surprise. Instead of fighting by his side she simply made a contemptuous sound and darted through the door left open by the guards. Altaïr had a moment to wonder whether he should follow, and then the brothers were upon him and he was fighting for his life against the two skilled swordsmen.

The fight was long and brutal and the twins began confidently, sure that they would swiftly overwhelm the Assassin. After all, there were two of them and both were adept with a blade; rightly, they expected to wear him down. But Altaïr was fighting with a bellyful of anger and frustration. He no longer knew who was friend and who foe. He had been betrayed – men who were supposed to be friends had turned out to be enemies. Those he thought might become friends – or more than friends – had spurned the hand of friendship he offered to them. He knew only that he was fighting a war in which more was at stake than he knew, involving powers and ideologies he had yet to understand. He had to keep fighting, to keep struggling, until he reached the end.

And when the slain bodies of the twins at last lay at his feet, their arms and legs at twisted, wrong angles, their dead eyes wide, he took no pleasure or gratification in his victory. He merely shook the blood from his sword, sheathed

it and made his way to the balcony. From behind him he heard more guards arriving as he stood on the balustrade with his arms outstretched. Below him was a cart and he dropped into it, then disappeared into the city.

Later, when he returned to the safe-house, Markos was there to meet him, eager to hear the tale of the brothers' demise. Around them, members of the Resistance were embracing, overjoyed at the news. At last the Resistance could regain control of Kyrenia. And if Kyrenia, then surely there was hope for the whole island.

Markos beamed at him. 'It's happening, Altaïr. The ports are emptying of Templar ships. Kyrenia will be free. Maybe all of Cyprus.'

Altaïr smiled, encouraged by the joy in Markos's eyes. 'Stay cautious,' he advised.

He remembered that he was still no closer to discovering the location of the archive. The Templars' departure was telling him something. 'They wouldn't leave their archive undefended,' he said, 'so it cannot be here.'

Markos considered. 'Most of the ships that left here were headed back to Limassol. Could it be there?'

Altaïr nodded. 'Thank you, Markos. You have served the country well.'

'God speed, Altaïr.'

Later, Altaïr found his way to a ship that would return him to Limassol. There, he hoped to unravel the mystery of the Templars' intentions, to root out the truth about Alexander.

He pondered on it during the crossing, writing in his journal,

> *I remember my moment of weakness, my confidence shaken by Al Mualim's words. He, who had been like a father, was revealed to be my greatest enemy. Just the briefest flicker of doubt was all he needed to creep into my mind with this device. But I vanquished his phantoms, restored my self-confidence, and sent him from this world.*

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Limassol was much as he'd had left it, rife with Templar men and soldiers, a resentful populace carrying on as normal, discontent on their faces as they continued with their business.

Wasting no time, Altaïr located the new Resistance safe-house, a disused warehouse, and entered it, determined to confront Alexander with what he had learned in the conversation he'd overheard between Bouchart and Shalim. But when he entered the building it was Alexander who reacted to him.

'Stay back, traitor. You have betrayed the Resistance and sold out our cause. Have you been working with Bouchart all this time?'

Altaïr had been prepared for a confrontation with Alexander, perhaps even to meet him in combat, but the sight of the Resistance man in such a state calmed him, made him think that he had misinterpreted what he had seen. All the same he stayed cautious.

'I was about to ask the same of you, Alexander. I overheard Bouchart mention your name. He delivered a package to you, did he not?'

With narrowed eyes, Alexander nodded. The furniture in the safe-house was sparse but there was a low table nearby and on it the small sack Altaïr had seen handed to Shalim by Bouchart in Kyrenia.

'Yes,' said Alexander, 'the head of poor Barnabas in a burlap sack.'

Altaïr walked to it. He pulled the drawstring on the sack and the material fell away to reveal a decapitated head, but …

'This was not the man who met me in Kyrenia,' said Altaïr, staring sadly at the severed head. It had begun to discolour and emitted a powerful, unpleasant smell. The eyes were half closed, the mouth hanging slightly open, the tongue visible inside.

'What?' said Alexander.

'The real Barnabas had been murdered before I arrived, replaced by a Templar agent who did much damage before he vanished,' said Altaïr.

'God help us. The Templars have been equally brutal here, with captains roaming the market, the ports and Cathedral Square arresting anyone they see fit.'

‘Don’t despair,’ said Altaïr. ‘Kyrenia has already shaken off the Templars. We will expel them from Limassol, too.’

‘You must be careful. Templar propaganda has turned some of my men against you, and most others are wary.’

‘Thank you for the warning.’

Altaïr conducted a fruitless search of the city for Bouchart, but when he returned to share the bad news with Alexander he found the safe-house empty except for a note. It sat on the table and Altaïr picked it up. Alexander wanted to meet him in the courtyard of the castle. So the note said, anyway.

Altaïr thought. Had he ever seen Alexander’s script? He didn’t think so. Anyway, the Bureau man might have been coerced into writing a note.

As he made his way to the rendezvous, all his instincts told him that this could be a trap, and it was with a sinking heart that he came across a body in the courtyard where they were due to meet.

No, he thought.

Straight away he looked around him. The empty ramparts surrounding the courtyard stared emptily back. Indeed, the whole area was far quieter than he would have expected. He knelt to the body, his fears realized as he turned it over to see Alexander’s lifeless eyes staring back at him.

Then from above him came a voice and he straightened, spinning to see a figure on the ramparts overlooking the courtyard. Dazzled by the sun he put up a hand to shield his eyes, still unable to make out the face of the man standing there. Was it Bouchart? Whoever it was, he wore the red cross of the Crusader and stood with his legs slightly apart, his hands on his hips, every inch of him the conquering hero.

The knight pointed at Alexander’s corpse. His voice was mocking: ‘A friend of yours?’

Altaïr hoped soon to make the knight pay for that scorn. Now the man shifted slightly and Altaïr was at last able to see him clearly. It was the spy. The one who had called himself Barnabas in Kyrenia – who was probably responsible for killing the real Barnabas. Another good man dead. Altaïr hoped to make him pay for that too. His fists clenched and the muscles in his jaw jumped. For the time being, though, the spy had him at a disadvantage.

‘You,’ he called up to him. ‘I didn’t catch your name.’

‘What did I tell you in Kyrenia?’ chuckled the knight – the spy. ‘Barnabas, wasn’t it?’

Suddenly a great shout went up and Altaïr turned to see a group of citizens enter the courtyard. He had been set up. The spy had put out the word against him. Now he was being framed for the murder of Alexander, the angry mob

having been timed to arrive at exactly the right moment. It was a trap and he had walked straight into it, even though instinct had told him to exercise caution.

Once again he cursed himself. He looked around. The sandstone walls loomed over him. A set of steps led to the ramparts but there at the top stood the spy, grinning from ear to ear, enjoying the show that was about to start in earnest as the citizens came running towards Altaïr, their blood up, the need for revenge and justice burning in their eyes.

‘There’s the traitor!’

‘String him up!’

‘You’ll pay for your crimes!’

Altaïr stood his ground. His first impulse was to reach for his sword but no: he could not kill any citizen. To do so would be to destroy any faith they had in the Resistance or the Assassins. All he could do was protest his innocence. But they were not to be reasoned with. Desperately he searched for the answer.

And found it.

The Apple.

It was as though it was calling to him. Suddenly he was aware of it in the pack at his back and he brought it out now, holding it so that it was facing towards the crowd.

He had no idea what he was trying to do with it and was not sure what would happen. He sensed that the Apple would obey his commands; that it would understand his intent. But it was just a sense. A feeling. An instinct.

And it did. It throbbed and glowed in his hands. It gave out a strange diaphanous light that seemed to settle around the crowd, which was immediately pacified, frozen to the spot. Altaïr saw the Templar spy recoil with shock. Briefly he felt all-powerful, and in that moment he recognized not only the seductive allure of the Apple and the godlike strength it bestowed, but the terrible danger it posed – in the hands of those who would use it for ill, of course, but also with him. Even he was not immune to its temptation. He used it now, but he pledged to himself that he would never use it again, not for these purposes anyway.

Then he was addressing the crowd.

‘Armand Bouchart is the man responsible for your misery,’ he called. ‘He hired this man to poison the Resistance against itself. Go from this place and rally your men. Cyprus will be yours once again.’

For a moment or so he wondered whether or not it had worked. When he lowered the Apple, would the angry crowd simply resume their lynching? But lower it he did, and the crowd did not move upon him. His words had swayed them. His words had persuaded them. Without further ceremony, they turned and

moved out of the courtyard, leaving as quickly as they had arrived, but subdued, penitent even.

Once more the courtyard was empty and, for a few heartbeats, Altaïr looked at the Apple in his hand, watched it fade, feeling in awe of it, frightened by it, attracted to it. Then he tucked it safely away as the spy said, ‘Quite a toy you have there. Mind if I borrow it?’

Altaïr knew one thing: that the Templar would have to take the Apple from his dead body. He drew his blade ready for combat as the Templar smiled, anticipating the fight ahead, about to climb down from the ramparts when …

He stopped.

And the smile slid from his face like dripping oil.

Protruding from his chest was a blade. Blood flowered at his white tunic, mingling with the red of the cross he wore. He looked down at himself, confused, as if wondering how the weapon had got there. Below him in the courtyard Altaïr was wondering the same thing. Then the Templar was swaying and Altaïr saw a figure behind him. A figure he recognized: Maria.

She smiled, shoved the spy forward from the courtyard wall and let him tumble heavily to the ground below. Standing there, her sword dripping blood, she grinned at Altaïr, shook it, then replaced it in her sheath.

‘So,’ she said, ‘you had the Apple all along.’

He nodded. ‘And now you see what kind of a weapon it could be in the wrong hands.’

‘I don’t know if I’d call yours the right hands.’

‘No. Quite right. I will destroy it … or hide it. Until I can find the archive, I can’t say.’

‘Well, look no further,’ she said. ‘You’re standing on it.’

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Just then there was great shout at the entranceway to the courtyard and a group of Templar soldiers rushed in, eyes dangerous slits behind their visors.

From above Maria called, ‘This way – quickly!’ She turned and darted along the ramparts to a door. Altaïr was about to follow when the three men were upon him and he cursed, meeting them with a chiming of steel, losing sight of Maria yet again.

They were skilled and had trained hard – they had the neck muscles to prove it – but even three knights were no match for the Assassin, who danced around them nimbly, cutting into them until all three lay dead at his feet.

He cast a look upwards. The ramparts were empty. Just the dead body of the Templar spy at the top of the steps and no sign of Maria. He bounded up the steps, pausing just a moment to look down at the dead man. If the job of an agent was to disrupt the enemy then this one had done his job well; he had almost turned the people against the Resistance, delivering them into the hands of the Templars – who planned not to enlighten but to subjugate and control them.

Altaïr raced on, reaching the door at the end. This, then, was the entrance to the building housing the archive. He stepped inside.

The door slammed behind him. He found himself on a walkway that ran along the wall of a cavernous shaft, leading downwards. Torches on the walls gave out a meagre light, casting dancing shadows on the Templar crosses that decorated the walls. It was quiet.

No, not quite.

From somewhere far below he could hear shouting. Guards, perhaps, alerted to the presence of … Maria? Such a free spirit could never align herself with Templar ideologies. She was a traitor now. She had come over to the way of the Assassin: she had slain a Templar and shown an Assassin the location of the archive. They would kill her on the spot. Although, of course, from what he had seen of her in combat that might be easier said than done.

He began to descend, running down the dark steps, occasionally leaping gaps in the crumbling stonework, until he reached a chamber with a sandy floor. Arriving to meet him were three guards, and he disposed of one with a throwing

knife straight away, wrongfooted a second and rammed his sword into the man's neck. He thrust the body into the third, who fell, and as they writhed on the ground, Altaïr finished them. Probing deeper, he heard rushing water, and found himself on a bridge passing between two waterfalls. The sound was enough to smother the noise of his arrival from the two guards at the opposite end of the bridge. He felled them both with two slashes of his blade.

He left them, continuing down and into the bowels of … the library. Now he saw shelves of books, rooms full of them. This was it. He was here. What he'd expected to see he wasn't sure, but there were fewer book and artefacts than he had imagined. Did this really constitute the famous archive he'd heard about?

But he had no time to stop and inspect his find. He could hear voices, the anvil sound of sword strikes: two combatants, one of whom was unmistakably female.

Ahead of him a large arch was decorated with the Templar cross at its apex. He went to it and entered a vast chamber, with a ceremonial area at its centre ringed by intricate stone pillars. There, in the middle, were Bouchart and Maria, fighting. She was holding the Templar leader off, but only just, and even as Altaïr entered the chamber he struck her and she tumbled, yelling in pain, to the stone.

Bouchart gave her an indifferent look, already turning to face Altaïr, who had made no sound when he entered the chamber.

'Witless Emperor Comnenus,' announced the Templar, contemptuous of the erstwhile Cypriot leader, 'he was a fool, but he was *our* fool. For almost a decade we operated without interference on this island. Our archive was the best-kept secret on Cyprus. Unfortunately, even the best-laid plans were not immune to Isaac's idiocy.'

For almost a decade, thought Altaïr. But then … He took a step forward, looking from Bouchart to Maria. 'He angered King Richard and brought the English a little too close for comfort. Is that it?'

When Bouchart made no move to stop him, he crossed the floor and bent to Maria. He held her face, looking for signs of life.

Bouchart was talking, enjoying the sound of his own voice. 'Fortunately we were able to convince Richard to sell the island to us. It was the only way to divert his attention.'

Her eyes fluttered. She groaned. *Alive*. Breathing a sigh of relief, Altaïr laid her head gently on the stone and straightened to face Bouchart, who had been watching them with an indulgent smile.

'Purchasing what you already controlled …' prompted Altaïr. He understood now. The Templars had purchased Cyprus from King Richard to stop their

archive being discovered. Little wonder that they had been aggressive in their pursuit of him when he arrived on the island.

Bouchart confirmed that he was correct. ‘And look where that has got us. Ever since you arrived and stuck your nose into too many dark corners, the archive hasn’t been safe.’

‘I wish I could say I’m sorry. But I tend to get what I want,’ replied Altaïr, sounding confident but knowing something wasn’t quite right.

Sure enough, Bouchart was grinning. ‘Oh, not this time, Assassin. Not now. Our little detour to Kyrenia gave us just enough time to dismantle the archive and move it.’

Of course. It wasn’t a meagre archive he’d been seeing on his way down. It was the unwanted *remnants* of one. They’d distracted him with the business in Kyrenia and used the opportunity to move it.

‘You weren’t shipping artefacts *to* Cyprus, you were shipping them out,’ said Altaïr, as it all became clear.

‘Exactly,’ said Bouchart, with a complimentary nod. ‘But not everything has to go … I think we’ll leave you here.’

Bouchart leaped forward, jabbing with his sword, and Altair deflected. Bouchart was ready and parried, sustaining his attack, and Altaïr was forced on to the back foot, defending a series of thrusts and slashes. Bouchart was skilled, that was certain. He was fast as well, relying more on grace and footwork than the brute strength most Crusaders brought to a swordfight. But he came forward expecting to win and to win quickly. His desperation to vanquish the Assassin rendered him oblivious to the physical demands of the fight, so that Altaïr defended, let him come, soaked up his attacks, every now and then offering a short attack of his own, opening wounds. A gash here, a nick there. Blood began to leak from beneath Bouchart’s chainmail, which hung heavy on him.

As Altaïr fought, he thought of Maria and of those who had died on the orders of the Templar, but he stopped those memories turning into the desire for vengeance. Instead he let them give him resolve. The smile had fallen from Bouchart’s face and, as Altaïr remained silent, the Templar Grand Master was grunting with the exertion – that and frustration. His sword swings were less co-ordinated and failed to meet their target. Sweat and blood poured from him. His teeth were bared.

And Altaïr opened more wounds, cutting him on the forehead so that blood was gushing into his eyes and he was wiping his gauntlet across his face to clear it away. Now Bouchart could barely lift the sword and was bent over, his legs rubbery and his shoulders heaving as he fought for breath, squinting through a

mask of blood to find the Assassin, seeing only shadows and shapes. He was a defeated man now. Which meant he was a dead man.

Altaïr didn't toy with him. He waited until the danger was over. Until he was sure that Bouchart's weakness was not feigned.

Then he ran him through.

Bouchart dropped to the ground and Altaïr knelt beside him. The Templar looked at him and Altaïr saw respect in his eyes.

'Ah. You are a … a credit to your Creed,' he gasped.

'And you have strayed from yours.'

'Not strayed … expanded. The world is more complicated than most dare admit. And if you, Assassin … if you knew more than how to murder, you might understand this.'

Altaïr frowned. 'Save your lecture on virtue for yourself. And die knowing that I will never let the Apple, the Piece of Eden, fall into any hands but my own.'

As he spoke of it, he felt it warm against his back, as though it had awoken.

Bouchart smiled ironically. 'Keep it close, Altair. You will come to the same conclusions we did … in time …'

He died. Altaïr reached to close his eyes, just as the building shook and he was showered with falling debris. Cannon fire. The Templars were shelling the archive. It made perfect sense. They wanted to leave nothing behind.

He scrambled over to Maria and pulled her to her feet. For a moment or so they looked into one another's eyes, some unspoken feeling passing between them. Then she tugged at his arm and was leading him out of the grand chamber just as it was shaken by more cannon fire. Altaïr turned in time to see two of the beautiful pillars crumple and fall, great sections of stone smashing to the floor. Then he was following Maria as she ran, taking the steps two at a time as they climbed back up the shaft to the sunken archive. It was rocked by another explosion, and masonry smashed into the walkway, but they kept running, kept dodging until they reached the exit.

The steps had fallen away so Altaïr climbed, dragging Maria up behind him to a platform. They pushed their way out into the day as the shelling intensified and the building seemed to fall in on itself, forcing them to jump clear. And there they stayed for some time, gulping clean air, glad to be alive.

Later, when the Templar ships had departed, taking the last of the precious archive with them, Altaïr and Maria were walking in the dying light in Limassol port, both lost in thought.

‘Everything I worked for in the Holy Land, I no longer want,’ said Maria, after a long pause. ‘And everything I gave up to join the Templars … I wonder where all that went, and if I should try to find it again.’

‘Will you return to England?’ asked Altaïr.

‘No … I’m so far from home already, I’ll continue east. To India, perhaps. Or until I fall off the far edge of the world … And you?’

Altaïr thought, enjoying the closeness they shared. ‘For a long time under Al Mualim, I thought my life had reached its limit, and that my sole duty was to show others the same precipice I had discovered.’

‘I felt the same once,’ she agreed.

From his pack he took the Apple and held it up for inspection. ‘As terrible as this artefact is, it contains wonders … I would like to understand it as best I can.’

‘You tread a thin line, Altaïr.’

He nodded slowly. ‘I know. But I have been ruined by curiosity, Maria. I want to meet the best minds, explore the libraries of the world, and learn all the secrets of nature and the universe.’

‘All in one lifetime? It’s a little ambitious …’

He chuckled. ‘Who can say? It could be that one life is just enough.’

‘Maybe. And where will you go first?’

He looked at her, smiling, knowing only that he wanted her with him for the rest of his journey. ‘East …’ he said.

Part Four

48

15 July 1257

Maffeo has this habit of looking at me strangely sometimes. It's as though he believes I'm not quite furnishing him with all the necessary information. And he has done this several times during our storytelling sessions. Whether watching the world go by in the busy market of Masyaf, enjoying the cool draughts in the catacombs beneath the citadel or strolling along the ramparts, seeing birds wheel and dip across the valleys, he looks at me every now and then, as if to say, 'What is it you're *not* telling me, Niccolò?'

Well, the answer, of course, is nothing, apart from my lingering suspicion that the story will eventually involve us in some way, that I'm being told these things for a reason. Will it involve the Apple? Or perhaps his journals? Or the codex, the book into which he has distilled his most significant findings?

Even so, Maffeo fixes me with the Look.

'And?'

'And what, brother?'

'Did Altaïr and Maria go east?'

'Maffeo, Maria is the mother of Darim, the gentleman who invited us here.'

I watched as Maffeo turned his head to the sun and closed his eyes to let it warm his face as he absorbed this information. I'm sure that he was trying to reconcile the image of the Darim we knew, a man in his sixties with the weathered face to prove it, with someone who had a mother – a mother like Maria.

I let him ponder, smiling indulgently. Just as Maffeo would pester me with questions during the tale, so of course I had pestered the Master, albeit with a good deal more deference.

'Where is the Apple now?' I had asked him once. If I'm honest, I had secretly hoped that at some point he would produce it. After all, he'd spoken about it in terms of such reverence, even sounding fearful of it at times. Naturally I had hoped to see it for myself. Perhaps to understand its allure.

Sadly, this was not to be. He met my question with a series of testy noises. I should not trouble myself with thoughts of the Apple, he had warned, with a wagging finger. I should concern myself with the codex instead. For contained in those pages were the secrets of the Apple, he said, but free of the artefact's malign effects.

The codex. Yes, I had decided, it was the codex that was to prove significant in the future. Significant in *my* future, even.

But anyway: back in the here and now, I watched Maffeo mull over the fact that Darim was the son of Altaïr and Maria; that from adversarial beginnings had flourished first a respect between the pair, then attraction, friendship, love and –

'Marriage?' said Maffeo. 'She and Altaïr were wed?'

'Indeed. Some two years after the events I've described, they were wed at Limassol. The ceremony was held there as a measure of respect to the Cypriots who had offered their island as a base for the Assassins, making it a key stronghold for the Order. I believe Markos was a guest of honour, and a somewhat ironic toast was proposed to the pirates, who had inadvertently been responsible for introducing him to Altaïr and Maria. Shortly after the wedding the Assassin and his bride returned to Masyaf, where their son Darim was born.'

'Their only son?'

'No. Two years after the birth of Darim, Maria gave birth to another, Sef, a brother to Darim.'

'And what of him?'

'All in good time, brother. All in good time. Suffice to say for now that this represented a mainly peaceful and fruitful period for the Master. He talks of it little, as though it is too precious to bring out into the light, but much of it is recorded in his codex. All the time he was making new discoveries and was in receipt of fresh revelations.'

'Such as?'

'He recorded them in his journals. In there you can see not only compounds for new Assassin poisons, but for medicine too. Descriptions of achievements yet to come and catastrophes yet to happen; designs for armour and for new hidden blades, including one that fires projectiles. He mused upon the nature of faith and of humanity's beginnings, forged from chaos, order imposed not by a supreme being but by man.'

Maffeo looked shocked. ' "Forged from chaos, order imposed not by a supreme being …" '

'The Assassin questions all fixed faith,' I said, not without a touch of pomposity. 'Even his own.'

'How so?'

‘Well, the Master wrote of the contradictions and ironies of the Assassin. How they seek to bring about peace yet use violence and murder as the means to do it. How they seek to open men’s minds yet require obedience to a master. The Assassin teaches the dangers of blindly believing in established faith but requires the Order’s followers to follow the Creed unquestioningly.

‘He wrote also of the Ones Who Came Before, the members of the first civilization, who left behind the artefacts hunted by both Templar and Assassin.’

‘The Apple being one of them?’

‘Exactly. A thing of immense power. Competed for by the Knights Templar. His experiences in Cyprus had shown him that the Templars, rather than trying to wrest control by the usual means, had chosen subterfuge for their strategy. Altaïr concluded that this, too, should be the way of the Assassin.

‘No longer should the Order build great fortresses and conduct lavish rituals. These, he decided, were not what makes the Assassin. What makes the Assassin is his adherence to the Creed. That originally espoused by Al Mualim, ironically enough. An ideology that challenged established doctrines. One that encouraged acolytes to reach beyond themselves and make the impossible possible. It was these principles that Altaïr developed and took with him in the years he spent travelling the Holy Land, stabilizing the Order and instilling in it the values he had learned as an Assassin. Only in Constantinople did his attempts to promote the way of the Assassin stumble. There, in 1204, great riots were taking place as the people rose up against the Byzantine emperor Alexius, and not long after that the Crusaders broke through and began a sack of the city. In the midst of such ongoing tumult, Altaïr was unable to carry out his plans and retreated. It became one of his few failures during that era.

‘Funny, when he told me that, he gave me an odd look.’

‘Because our home is in Constantinople?’

‘Possibly. I shall have to give the matter thought at a later date. It may well be that our hailing from Constantinople and his attempt to establish a guild there are not unrelated …’

‘His only failure, you say?’

‘Indeed. In all other ways, Altaïr did more to promote the Order than almost any leader before him. It was only the ascendancy of Genghis Khan that prevented him continuing his work.’

‘How so?’

‘Some forty years ago, Altaïr wrote of it in his codex. How a dark tide was rising to the east. An army of such size and power that all the land was made quick with worry.’

‘He was talking about the Mongol Empire?’ asked Maffeo. ‘The rise of Genghis Khan?’

‘Exactly,’ I said. ‘Darim was in his early twenties and an accomplished bowman, and so it was that Altaïr took him and Maria and left Masyaf.’

‘To confront Khan?’

‘Altaïr suspected that Genghis Khan’s progress might have been helped by another artefact, similar to the Apple. Perhaps the Sword. He needed to establish whether this was the case, as well as to stop Khan’s inexorable march.’

‘How was Masyaf left?’

‘Altaïr put Malik in charge in his place. He left Sef behind also, to help take care of affairs. Sef had a wife and two young daughters by then, Darim did not, and they were gone for a long time.’

‘How long?’

‘He was absent for *ten years*, brother, and when he returned to Masyaf everything there had changed. Nothing would ever be the same again. Do you want to hear about it?’

‘Please continue.’

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From a distance all looked well with Masyaf. None of them – not Altaïr, Maria or Darim – had any idea of what was to come.

Altaïr and Maria rode a little ahead, side by side, as was their preference, happy to be with one another and pleased to be within sight of home, each undulating with the slow, steady rhythm of their horses. Both rode high and proud in the saddle despite the long, arduous journey. They might have been advancing in years – both were in their mid-sixties – but it would not do to be seen slouching. Nevertheless they came slowly: their mounts were chosen for their strength and stamina, not speed, and tethered to each was an ass, laden with supplies.

Behind them came Darim, who had inherited the bright, dancing eyes of his mother, his father's colouring and bone structure, and the impulsiveness of both. He would have liked to gallop ahead and climb the slopes of the village to the citadel to announce his parents' return, but instead trotted meekly behind, respecting his father's wishes for a modest homecoming. Every now and then he swatted the flies from his face with his crop and thought that a gallop would have been the most effective way to rid himself of them. He wondered if they were being watched from the spires of the fortress, from its defensive tower.

Passing the stables, they went through the wooden gates and into the market, finding it unchanged. They came into the village, where children rushed excitedly around them calling for treats – children too young to know the Master. Older villagers recognized him, though, and Altaïr noticed them watching the party carefully, not with welcome but wariness. Faces were turned away when he tried to catch their eye. Anxiety bit into his gut.

Now a figure he knew was approaching them, meeting them at the bottom of the slopes to the citadel. Swami. An apprentice when he'd left, one of those who was too fond of combat, not enough of learning. He had collected a scar in the intervening ten years and it wrinkled when he smiled, a broad grin that went nowhere near his eyes. Perhaps he was already thinking of the teachings he would have to endure with Altaïr, now that he had returned.

But endure them he would, thought Altaïr, his gaze going past Swami to the castle, where a vast flag bearing the mark of the Assassins fluttered in the breeze. He had decreed that the flag be removed: the Assassins were disposing of such empty emblems. But Malik had evidently decided it should fly. He was another who would endure some teaching in the time ahead.

'Altaïr,' said Swami, with a bow of the head, and Altaïr decided to ignore the man's failure to address him by his correct title. For the time being at least. 'How pleasant it is to see you. I trust your travels proved fruitful.'

'I sent messages,' said Altaïr, leaning forward in his saddle. Darim drew up on the other side of him so that the three formed a line, looking down at Swami. 'Was the Order not told of my progress?'

Swami smiled obsequiously. 'Of course, of course. I asked merely out of courtesy.'

'I expected to be met by Rauf,' said Altaïr. 'He is most accustomed to meeting my needs.'

'Ah, poor Rauf.' Swami peered at the ground reflectively.

'Is something wrong?'

'Rauf, I'm afraid is dead of the fever these past few years.'

'Why was I not informed?'

At this Swami merely shrugged. An insolent shrug, as though he neither knew nor cared.

Altaïr pursed his lips, deciding that somebody had some explaining to do, even if it wasn't to be this cur. 'Then let us move on. I trust our quarters are prepared?'

Swami bowed his head again. 'I'm afraid not, Altaïr. Until such time as you can be accommodated I have been asked to direct you to a residence on the western side of the fortress.'

Altaïr looked first at Darim, who was frowning, then at Maria, who gazed at him with eyes that said, *Beware*. Something was not right.

'Very well,' said Altaïr, cautiously, and they dismounted. Swami gestured to some servant boys, who came forward to take the horses, and they began their ascent to the citadel gates. There the guards inclined their heads quickly, as though, like the villagers, they were keen to avoid Altaïr's eye, but instead of proceeding up the barbican, Swami led them around the outside of the inner curtain. Altaïr regarded the walls of the citadel stretching high above them, wanting to see the heart of the Order, feeling irritation build – but some instinct told him to bide his time. When they reached the residence it was a low building sunk into the stone with a short arch at its doorway and stairs leading down to a vestibule. The furniture was sparse and there were no staff to greet them. Altaïr

was used to modest accommodation – he demanded it, in fact – but here in Masyaf, as the Assassin Master, he expected his accommodation to be in the Master's tower or equivalent.

Bristling, he turned, about to remonstrate with Swami, who stood in the vestibule with the same obsequious grin on his face, when Maria grabbed his arm and squeezed it, stopping him.

'Where is Sef?' she asked Swami. She was smiling pleasantly, though Altaïr knew that she loathed Swami. Loathed him with every fibre in her body. 'I would like Sef sent here at once, please.'

Swami looked pained. 'I regret that Sef is not here. He has had to travel to Alamut.'

'His family?'

'Are accompanying him.'

Maria shot a look of concern to Altaïr.

'What business did my brother have in Alamut?' snapped Darim, even more put out then his parents by the scant quarters.

'Alas, I do not know,' oozed Swami.

Altaïr took a deep breath and approached Swami. The messenger's scar no longer crinkled as the sycophantic smile slid from his face. Perhaps he was suddenly reminded that this was Altaïr, the Master, whose skill in battle was matched only by his fierceness in the classroom.

'Inform Malik *at once* that I wish to see him,' growled Altaïr. 'Tell him he has some explaining to do.'

Swami swallowed, wringing his hands a little theatrically. 'Malik is in prison, Master.'

Altaïr started. '*In prison?* Why?'

'I'm not at liberty to say, Master. A meeting of the council has been called for tomorrow morning.'

'The what?'

'With Malik imprisoned, a council was formed to oversee the Order, in accordance with the statutes of the Brotherhood.'

This was true, but even so, Altaïr darkened. 'With *who* as its chairman?'

'Abbas,' replied Swami.

Altaïr looked at Maria, whose eyes showed real concern now. She reached to take his arm.

'And when do I meet this council?' asked Altaïr. His voice was calm, belying the storm in his belly.

'Tomorrow the council would like to hear the tale of your journey and apprise you of events at the Order.'

‘And after that the council shall be dissolved,’ said Altaïr, firmly. ‘Tell your council we shall see them at sunrise. Tell them to consult the statutes. The Master has returned and wishes to resume leadership.’

Swami bowed and left.

The family waited until he had gone before letting their true feelings show, when Altaïr turned to Darim and with urgency in his voice told him, ‘Ride to Alamut,’ he told him. ‘Bring Sef back here. He’s needed at once.’

50

The following day, Altaïr and Maria were about to make their way from their residence to the main tower when they were intercepted by Swami, who insisted on leading them through the barbican himself. As they skirted the wall Altaïr wondered why he couldn't hear the usual noise of swordplay and training from the other side. As they came into the courtyard he got his answer.

It was because there *was* no swordplay or training. Where once the inner areas of the citadel had hummed with activity and life, echoing to the metallic chime of sword strikes, the shouts and curses of the instructors, now it lay almost deserted. He looked around him, at the towers overlooking them, seeing black windows. Guards on the ramparts stared dispassionately down at them. The place of enlightenment and training – the crucible of Assassin knowledge he had left – had all but disappeared. Altair's mood darkened further as he was about to make his way to the main tower but Swami directed him instead to the steps that led up to the defence room, then into the main hall.

There, the council was gathered. Ten men were seated on opposite sides of a table with Abbas at their head, a pair of empty chairs for Altaïr and Maria: wooden, high-backed chairs. They took their seats and, for the first time since entering the room, Altaïr looked at Abbas, his old antagonist. He saw something in him other than weakness and resentment. He saw a rival. And for the first time since the night that Ahmad had come to his quarters and taken his own life, Altaïr no longer pitied Abbas.

Altaïr looked around the rest of the table. Just as he'd thought, the new council was made up of the most weak-minded and conniving members of the Order. Those Altaïr would have preferred to be cast out. All had joined this council, it seemed, or been recruited to it by Abbas. Characteristic of them was Farim, Swami's father, who watched him from beneath hooded lids, his chin tucked into this chest. His ample chest. They had got fat, thought Altaïr, scornfully.

'Welcome, Altaïr,' said Abbas. 'I'm sure I speak for us all when I say that I am looking forward to hearing of your exploits in the east.'

Maria leaned forward to address him. ‘Before we say anything of our travels, we would like some answers, please, Abbas. We left Masyaf in good order. It seems that standards have been allowed to slip.’

‘*We* left Masyaf in good order?’ smiled Abbas, though he had not looked at Maria. He hadn’t taken his gaze from Altaïr. The two were staring across the table at each other with open hostility. ‘When you left the Brotherhood I seem to recall there being only one Master. Now it appears we had two.’

‘Be careful your insolence does not cost you dear, Abbas,’ warned Maria.

‘*My* insolence?’ laughed Abbas. ‘Altaïr, please tell the infidel that from now on she may not speak unless directly addressed by a member of the council.’

With a shout of anger, Altaïr rose from his chair, which skittered back and tumbled on the stone. His hand was on the hilt of his sword but two guards came forward, their swords drawn.

‘Guards, take his weapon,’ commanded Abbas. ‘You will be more comfortable without it, Altaïr. Are you wearing your blade?’

Altaïr stretched out his arms as a guard stepped forward to take his sword. His sleeves fell away to reveal no hidden blade.

‘Now we can begin,’ said Abbas. ‘Please do not waste our time further. Update us on your quest to neutralize Khan.’

‘Only once you have told me what has happened to Malik,’ growled Altair.

Abbas shrugged and raised his eyebrows as if to say they were at an impasse, and of course they were, neither man willing to concede, it seemed. With a grunt of exasperation, Altaïr began his story, rather than prolong the stand-off. He related his journeys to Persia, India and Mongolia, where he, Maria and Darim had liaised with the Assassin Qulan Gal, and told of how they had travelled to the Xia province nearby to Xingging, which was besieged by the Mongolian Army, the spread of Khan’s empire inexorable. There, he said, Altaïr and Qulan Gal had planned to infiltrate the Mongolian camp. It was said that Khan was there, too.

‘Darim found a vantage point not far from the camp and, armed with his bow, would watch over Qulan Gal and me as we made our way through the tents. It was heavily guarded and we relied on him to dispose of any guards we alerted or who looked as though they might raise the alarm.’ Altaïr gazed around the table with a challenging stare. ‘And he performed this duty admirably.’

‘Like father, like son,’ said Abbas, with more than a hint of a sneer in his voice.

‘Perhaps not,’ said Altaïr, evenly. ‘For in the event it was I who was responsible for almost alerting the Mongolians to our presence.’

‘Ah,’ said Abbas. ‘He is not infallible.’

‘Nobody is, Abbas,’ replied Altaïr, ‘least of all me, and I allowed an enemy soldier to come up on me. He wounded me before Qulan Gal was able to kill him.’

‘Getting old, Altaïr?’ jeered Abbas.

‘Everybody is, Abbas,’ replied Altaïr. ‘And I would have been dead if Qulan Gal had not managed to take me from the camp and bring me to safety. His actions saved my life.’ He looked carefully at Abbas. ‘Qulan Gal returned to the camp. First he formulated a plan with Darim to flush Khan from his tent. Realizing the danger, Khan tried to escape on horseback, but he was brought down by Qulan Gal. Khan was finished with a shot from Darim.’

‘His skills as a bowman are beyond doubt,’ smiled Abbas. ‘I gather you have sent him away, perhaps to Alamut?’

Altaïr blinked. Abbas knew everything, it seemed. ‘He has indeed left the citadel on my orders. Whether to Alamut or not, I will not say.’

‘To see Sef at Alamut, perhaps?’ pressed Abbas. He addressed Swami. ‘You told them Sef was there, I trust?’

‘As instructed, Master,’ replied Swami.

Altaïr felt something worse than worry in his gut now. Something that might have been fear. He felt it from Maria, too: her face was drawn and anxious. ‘Say what you have to say, Abbas,’ he said.

‘Or what, Altaïr?’

‘Or my first task when I resume leadership will be to have you thrown in the dungeon.’

‘There to join Malik, maybe?’

‘I doubt that Malik belongs in prison,’ snapped Altaïr. ‘Of what crime is he accused?’

‘A murder.’ Abbas smirked.

It was as though the word thumped on to the table.

‘Murder of whom?’ asked Maria.

And the reply when it came sounded as though it was given from far, far away.

‘Sef. Malik murdered your son.’

Maria’s head dropped into her hands.

‘No!’ Altaïr heard someone say, then realized his own voice had spoken.

‘I am sorry, Altaïr,’ said Abbas, speaking as though he was reciting something from memory. ‘I am sorry that you have returned to hear this most tragic news, and may I say that I speak for all of those assembled when I extend my sympathy to you and your family. But until certain matters are resolved it will not be possible for you to resume leadership of the Order.’

Altaïr was still trying to unravel the jumble of emotion in his head, aware of Maria beside him, sobbing.

‘What?’ he said. Then louder: ‘*What?*’

‘You remain compromised at this point,’ said Abbas, ‘so I have taken the decision that control of the Order remains with the council.’

Altaïr shook with fury. ‘*I* am the Master of this Order, Abbas. I demand that leadership is returned to me, in line with the statutes of the Brotherhood. They *decree* it be returned to me.’ He was shouting now.

‘They do not.’ Abbas smiled. ‘Not any more.’

51

Later, Altaïr and Maria sat in their residence, huddled together on a stone bench, silent in the near dark. They had spent years sleeping in deserts but had never felt so isolated and alone as they did at that moment. They grieved at their lowly circumstances; they grieved that Masyaf had become neglected in their absence; they fretted for Sef's family and Darim.

But most of all they grieved for Sef.

He had been stabbed to death in his bed, they said, just two weeks ago; there had been no time to send a message to Altaïr. The knife was discovered in Malik's quarters. He had been heard arguing with Sef earlier that day by an Assassin. The name of the Assassin who had heard the argument, Altaïr had yet to learn, but whoever it was had reported hearing Sef and Malik arguing over the leadership of the Order, with Malik claiming that he intended to keep it once Altaïr returned.

'It was news of your return that sparked the disagreement, it would seem,' Abbas had gloated, revelling in Altaïr's ashen look, the quiet weeping of Maria.

Sef had been heard threatening to reveal Malik's plans to Altaïr so Malik had killed him. That was the theory.

Beside him, her head tucked into his chest and her legs pulled up, Maria sobbed still. Altaïr smoothed her hair and rocked her until she quietened. Then he watched the shadows cast by the firelight flickering and dancing on the yellow stone wall, listening to the crickets from outside, the occasional crunch of guards' footsteps.

A short while later Maria awoke with a jump. He started too – he had been falling asleep himself, lulled by the leaping flames. She sat up, shivering, and pulled her blanket tight round herself. 'What are we going to do, my love?' she asked.

'Malik,' he said simply. He was staring at the wall with sightless eyes and spoke as though he hadn't heard the question.

'What of him?'

'When we were younger. The assignment in the Temple Mount. My actions caused him great pain.'

‘But you learned,’ she said. ‘And Malik knew that. From that day a new Altaïr was born, who led the Order into greatness.’

Altaïr made a disbelieving sound. ‘Greatness? Really?’

‘Not *now*, my love,’ she said. ‘Maybe not now but you can restore it to how it was before all of this. You are the only one who can do it. Not Abbas.’ She said his name as though she had tasted something especially unpleasant. ‘Not some *council*. You. Altaïr. The Altaïr I’ve watched serve the Order for more than thirty years. The Altaïr who was born on that day.’

‘It cost Malik his brother,’ said Altaïr. ‘His arm too.’

‘He forgave you, and has served as your trusted lieutenant ever since the defeat of Al Mualim.’

‘What if it was a façade?’ said Altaïr, voice low. He could see his own shadow on the wall, dark and foreboding.

She jerked away from him. ‘What are you saying?’

‘Perhaps Malik has nurtured a hatred of me all these years,’ he said. ‘Perhaps Malik has secretly coveted the leadership and Sef discovered that.’

‘Yes, and perhaps I’ll grow wings in the night and fly,’ said Maria. ‘Who do you think *really* nurses a hatred for you, Altaïr? It’s not Malik. It’s Abbas.’

‘The knife was found in Malik’s bed,’ said Altaïr.

‘Put there, of course, to implicate him, either by Abbas or by someone in his thrall. I wouldn’t be at all surprised if Swami was the man responsible for it. And what of this Assassin who heard Malik and Sef arguing? When is he to be produced? When we see him, do you think we’ll discover that he’s an ally of Abbas? Perhaps the son of another council member? And what of poor Rauf? I wonder if he really died of the fever. Shame on you for doubting Malik when all of this is so *obviously* the work of Abbas.’

‘Shame on me?’ he rounded on her, and she pulled away. Outside, the crickets stopped their noise as though to hear them argue. ‘Shame on me for doubting Malik? Do I not have past experience of those I love turning against me, and for reasons far more fragile than Malik has? Abbas I loved as a brother and I tried to do right by him. Al Mualim betrayed the whole order but it was me he had taken as a son. Shame on me for being suspicious? To be trusting is my greatest downfall. Trusting in the wrong people.’

He looked hard at her and she narrowed her eyes. ‘You must destroy the Apple, Altaïr,’ she said. ‘It’s twisting your mind. It is one thing to have a mind that is open. It is quite another to have one so open that the birds can shit into it.’

He looked at her. ‘I’m not sure that that’s how I would have put it,’ he said, a sad smile forming.

‘Perhaps not, but even so.’

‘I need to find out, Maria,’ he said. ‘I need to know for sure.’

He was aware that they were being watched, but he was an Assassin and he knew Masyaf better than anyone, so it was not difficult for him to leave the residence, make his way up the wall of the inner curtain and squat in the shadows of the ramparts until the guards had moved past. He controlled his breathing. He was still quick and agile. He could still scale walls. But …

Perhaps not with the same ease he once had. He would do well to remember that. The wound he’d received in Genghis Khan’s camp had slowed him down too. It would be foolish to overestimate his own abilities and find himself in trouble because of it, flat on his back like a dying cockroach, hearing guards approach because he’d mistimed a jump. He rested a little before continuing along the ramparts, making his way from the western side of the citadel to the south tower complex. Staying clear of guards along the way, he came to the tower then climbed down to the ground. He moved to the grain stores, where he located a flight of stone steps that led to a series of vaulted tunnels below.

There he stopped and listened, his back flat against the wall. He could hear water flowing along the small streams that ran through the tunnels. The Order’s dungeons were not far away, so rarely used that they would have been kept as storerooms were it not for the damp. Altaïr fully expected Malik to be their only occupant.

He crept forward until he could see the guard. He was sitting in the tunnel with his back against a side wall of the cell block, head lolled in sleep. He was some way from the cells, and didn’t even have them in his eyeline, so exactly what he thought he was guarding was hard to say. Altaïr found himself simultaneously outraged and relieved at the man’s sloppiness. He moved stealthily past him – and it swiftly became clear why he was sitting so far away.

It was the stink. Of the three cells, only the middle one was fastened and Altaïr went to it. He was not sure what he was expecting to see on the other side of the bars, but he was certain of what he could smell, and held a hand over his nose.

Malik was curled up in the rushes that had been spread on the stone – and did nothing to soak up the urine. He was clothed in rags, looking like a beggar. He was emaciated and, through his tattered shirt, Altaïr could see the lines of his ribs. His cheekbones were sharp outcrops on his face; his hair was long, his beard overgrown.

He had been in the cell for far longer than a month. That much was certain.

As he gazed at Malik, Altaïr’s fists clenched. He had planned to speak to him to determine the truth, but the truth was there on his jutting ribs and tattered

clothes. How long had he been imprisoned? Long enough to send a message to Altaïr and Maria. How long had Sef been dead? Altaïr preferred not to think about it. All he knew was that Malik wasn't spending another moment there.

When the guard opened his eyes it was to see Altaïr standing over him. Then, for him, the lights went out. When he next awoke he would find himself locked inside the piss-stinking cell, fruitlessly shouting for help, with Malik and Altaïr long gone.

'Can you walk, my friend?' Altaïr had said.

Malik had looked at him with blurry eyes. All the pain in those eyes. When he had eventually focused on Altaïr, a look of gratitude and relief had come to his face, so sincere that if there had been the slightest doubt in Altaïr's mind it was banished at once.

'For you, I can walk,' said Malik, and attempted a smile.

But as they made their way back along the tunnel it had soon become clear that Malik did not have the strength to walk. Instead, Altaïr had taken his good arm, brought it around his shoulders and carried his old friend to the ladders of the tower, then across the ramparts, eventually descending the wall on the western side of the citadel, avoiding guards along the way. At last they arrived back at the residence. Altaïr looked first one way, then the other before he let himself in.

52

They laid Malik on a pallet and Maria sat as his side, giving him sips from a beaker.

‘Thank you,’ he gasped. His eyes had cleared a little. He pulled himself up in the bed, seeming uncomfortable with Maria’s proximity, as though he thought it dishonourable to be tended by her.

‘What happened to Sef?’ asked Altaïr. With three of them inside it, the room was small. Now it became smaller, seeming to close in on them.

‘Murdered,’ said Malik. ‘Two years ago Abbas staged his coup. He had Sef killed, then placed the murder weapon in my room. Another Assassin swore that he’d heard Sef and me arguing, and Abbas brought the Order to the conclusion that it was I who was responsible for Sef’s murder.’

Altaïr and Maria looked at one another. For two years their son had been dead. Altaïr felt rage bubbling within him and strove to control it – to control the impulse to turn, leave the room, go to the fortress and cut Abbas, watch him beg for mercy and bleed to death.

Maria put a hand to his arm, feeling and sharing his pain.

‘I’m sorry,’ said Malik. ‘I couldn’t send a message while I was in prison. Besides, Abbas controlled all communications in and out of the fortress. No doubt he has been busy changing other ordinances during my imprisonment, for his own benefit.’

‘He has,’ said Altaïr. ‘It seems he has supporters on the council.’

‘I’m sorry, Altaïr,’ said Malik. ‘I should have anticipated Abbas’s plans. For years after your departure he worked to undermine me. I had no idea he had managed to command such support. It would not have happened to a stronger leader. It would not have happened to you.’

‘Don’t trouble yourself. Rest, my friend,’ said Altaïr, and he motioned to Maria.

In the next room the two of them sat: Maria on the stone bench, Altaïr on a high-backed chair.

‘Do you know what you have to do?’ said Maria.

‘I have to destroy Abbas,’ said Altaïr.

‘But not for the purposes of vengeance, my love,’ she insisted, looking deep into his eyes. ‘For the Order. For the good of the Brotherhood. To take it back and make it great once more. If you can do that, and if you can let it take precedence over your own thoughts of revenge, the Order will love you as a father who shows it the true path. If you let yourself be blinded by anger and emotion, how can you expect them to listen when what you teach is the other way?’

‘You’re right,’ he said, after a pause. ‘Then how shall we proceed?’

‘We must confront Abbas. We must dispute the accusation made against our son’s murderer. The Order will have to accept that, and Abbas will be forced to answer for himself.’

‘It will be the word of Malik against Abbas and his agent, whoever that is.’

‘A weasel like Abbas? His agent is even less trustworthy, I should imagine. The Brotherhood will believe you, my love. They will *want* to believe you. You are the great Altaïr. If you can resist your desire for revenge, if you can take back the Order by fair means, not foul, then the foundations you lay will be even stronger.’

‘I shall see him now,’ said Altaïr, standing.

They checked to make sure that Malik was asleep, then left, taking a torch. With early-morning mist swirling at their feet, they walked fast around the outside of the inner curtain and then to the main gate. Behind them were the slopes of Masyaf, the village empty and silent, yet to awake from its slumber. A sleepy Assassin guard looked them over, insolent in his indifference, and Altaïr found himself fighting his rage, but they passed the man, climbed the barbican and went into the main courtyard.

A bell sounded.

It was not a signal Altaïr knew. He raised his torch and looked around, the bell still ringing. Then he sensed movement from within the towers overlooking the courtyard. Maria urged him on and they came to the steps leading to the dais outside the Master’s tower. Now Altaïr turned and saw that white-robed Assassins carrying flaming torches were entering the courtyard behind them, summoned by the bell, which stopped suddenly.

‘I wish to see Abbas,’ Altaïr told the guard at the door to the tower, his voice loud and calm in the eerie silence. Maria glanced behind, and at her sharp intake of breath Altaïr turned. He gasped. The Assassins were assembling. All were looking at himself and Maria. For a moment he wondered if they were in some kind of thrall, but no. The Apple was with him, safely tucked into his robe, and dormant. These men were waiting.

For what? Altaïr had a feeling he was soon to find that out.

Now the door to the tower was opening and Abbas was standing before them.

Altaïr felt the Apple – it was almost as though a person were prodding him in the back. Perhaps it was reminding him of its presence.

Abbas strode on to the platform. ‘Please explain why you broke into the Order’s cells.’

He was addressing the crowd as much as Altaïr and Maria. Altaïr glanced behind him and saw that the courtyard was full. The Assassins’ torches were like balls of flame in the dark.

So Abbas meant to discredit him in front of the Order. But Maria had been correct – he wasn’t up to the task. All Abbas had achieved was to accelerate his own downfall.

‘I meant to establish the truth about my son,’ said Altaïr.

‘Oh, really?’ smiled Abbas. ‘Are you sure it wasn’t to exact revenge?’

Swami had arrived. He climbed the steps to the platform. He was holding something in a burlap sack that he handed to Abbas, who nodded. Altaïr looked at the sack warily, his heart hammering. Maria too.

Abbas peered into the sack and gave a look of mock concern at what he saw inside. Then, with a theatrical air, he reached in and paused for a moment to enjoy the frisson of anticipation that ran through the assembly like a shiver.

‘Poor Malik,’ he said, and pulled out a disembodied head: the skin at the neck was ragged and dripping fresh blood, the eyeballs had rolled up, and the tongue protruded slightly.

‘*No!*’ Altaïr started forward, and Abbas motioned to the guards, who rushed forward, grabbing Altaïr and Maria, disarming Altaïr and pinning his hands behind his back.

Abbas dropped the head back into the sack and tossed it aside. ‘Swami heard you and the infidel plotting Malik’s death. What a shame we could not reach Malik in time to prevent it.’

‘*No!*’ shouted Altaïr. ‘Lies! I would never have killed Malik.’ Pulling at the guards who held him, he indicated Swami. ‘He’s lying.’

‘Is the dungeon guard lying, too?’ said Abbas. ‘The one who saw you drag Malik from his cell. Why did you not kill him there and then, Altaïr? Did you want to make him suffer? Did your English wife want to make vengeful cuts of her own?’

Altaïr struggled. ‘Because I did not kill him,’ he shouted, ‘I learned from him that it was *you* who ordered the murder of Sef.’

And suddenly he knew. He looked at Swami and saw his scorn, and knew that he had killed Sef. He felt the Apple at his back. With it he could lay waste to the courtyard. Kill every treacherous dog among them. They would *all* feel his fury.

But no. He had promised never to use it in anger. He had promised Maria he wouldn't allow his thoughts to be clouded by vengeance.

'It is you who has broken the Creed, Altaïr,' said Abbas. 'Not I. You are unfit to lead the Order. I hereby assume leadership myself.'

'You can't do that,' scoffed Altaïr.

'I can.' Abbas came down from the platform, reached for Maria and pulled her to him. In the same movement he produced a dagger that he held to her throat. She scowled and struggled, cursing him, until he jabbed the dagger at her neck, drawing blood and calming her. She held Altaïr's gaze over his arm, sending messages with her eyes, knowing that the Apple would be calling to him. She, too, had realized that Swami had killed Sef. Just like Altaïr she would crave retribution. Her eyes pleaded with him to keep calm.

'Where is the Apple, Altaïr?' said Abbas. 'Show me, or I shall open the infidel a new mouth.'

'Do you hear this?' called Altaïr, over his shoulder, to the Assassins. 'Do you hear how he plans to take the leadership? He wants the Apple not to open minds but to control them.'

It was searing his back now.

'Tell me now, Altaïr,' repeated Abbas. He prodded harder with the dagger and Altaïr recognized the knife. It had belonged to Abbas's father. It was the dagger Ahmad had used to cut his own throat in Altaïr's room a whole lifetime ago. And now it was being held to Maria's.

He fought to control himself. Abbas pulled Maria along the dais, appealing to the crowd: 'Do we trust Altaïr with the Piece of Eden?' he asked them. In return there was a noncommittal murmur. 'Altaïr who exercises his temper in place of reason? Should he not be *compelled* to hand it over without recourse to this?'

Altaïr craned to see over his shoulder. The Assassins were shifting uncomfortably, talking among themselves, still in shock at the turn of events. His eyes went to the burlap bag and then to Swami. There was blood on Swami's robes, he noticed, as though he'd been hit by a fine spray of it: Malik's blood. And Swami was grinning, his scar crinkled. Altaïr wondered if he had grinned when he stabbed Sef.

'You can have it,' called Altaïr. 'You can have the Apple.'

'No, Altaïr,' cried Maria.

'Where is it?' asked Abbas. He remained at the end of the dais.

'I have it,' said Altaïr.

Abbas looked concerned. He pulled Maria closer to him, using her as a shield. Blood poured from where he'd nicked her with the knife. At a nod from Abbas

the guards loosened their grip on Altaïr, who reached for the Apple, bringing it from within his robe.

Swami reached for it. Touched it.

And then, very quietly, so that only Altaïr could hear, he said, ‘I told Sef it was you who ordered his death. He died believing his own father had betrayed him.’

The Apple was glowing and Altair had failed to control himself. Swami, his hand on the Apple, suddenly tautened, his eyes popping wide.

Then his head was tilting to one side, his body shifting and writhing as though it were operated by some force inside. His jaws opened but no words came out. The inside of his mouth glowed gold. His tongue worked within it. Then, compelled by the Apple, he stepped away, and all watched as his hands went to his face and he began to tear at the flesh there, gouging deep trenches in it with his fingernails. Blood ran from the churned skin and still he mauled himself, as though he were attacking dough, ripping at the skin of his cheek and tearing a long flap from it, wrenching at one ear, until it dangled from the side of his face.

Altaïr felt the power coursing through him, as though it leaped from the Apple and spread like a disease through his veins. As though it fed off his hatred and his need for revenge, then flowed from the Apple into Swami. Altaïr felt all of this as an exquisite mix of pleasure and pain that threatened to lift him off his feet – that made his head feel as if it might expand and explode, the sensation at once wonderful and terrible.

So wonderful and terrible that he did not hear Maria screaming to him.

Neither was he aware of her pulling away from Abbas and dashing down the dais towards him.

At the same time Swami had pulled his dagger from its sheath and was using it on himself, cutting himself with wild, broad slashes, opening wounds on his face and body, slicing into himself as Maria reached them, trying desperately to stop Altaïr using the Apple. Altaïr had a second to see what was going to happen but was too late to stop it. He saw Swami’s dagger flash, and Maria, her throat exposed, suddenly spinning away with blood shooting from her neck. She folded to the wood, her arms outflung. She breathed once. As blood spread quickly around her, her shoulders heaved with a long, ragged gasp and one hand twitched, knocking at a wooden support on the dais.

At the same time, Swami fell away, his sword clattering to the floor. The Apple glowed brightly once, then dimmed. Altaïr dropped to his knees beside Maria, taking her by the shoulder and turning her over.

She looked at him. Her eyelids fluttered. ‘Be strong,’ she said. And died.

The courtyard was silent. All that could be heard was Altaïr's sobbing as he gathered Maria to him and held her, a man crushed.

He heard Abbas calling, '*Men. Take him*.'

Then he stood. Through eyes thick with tears he saw Assassins running towards the dais. On their faces was fear. He still held the Apple. The crowd was in disarray. Most had drawn their swords, even though they knew steel would be useless against the Apple, but better that than flee. Suddenly the urge was strong, overpowering almost, to use the Apple to destroy everything he could see, including himself, because Maria was dead at his hands and she had been his light. In one moment – in one blinding flash of rage – he had destroyed what he held most dear.

The Assassins paused. Would Altaïr use the Apple? He could see the question in their eyes.

'Get him!' screeched Abbas, and they came forward cautiously.

Around Altaïr, the Assassins seemed unsure whether to attack him or not, so he ran.

'Archers!' screamed Abbas, and the bowmen snatched their shots as Altaïr raced out of the courtyard. Arrows hailed down around him, one slicing his leg. From left and right more Assassins came running, their robes flowing, swords held. Perhaps now they understood that Altaïr would not use the Apple a second time and they leaped from walls and railings to join the pursuit. Fleeing, Altaïr came to the arch and found it blocked. He turned, doubled back and barrelled through two Assassins in pursuit, one swinging his blade and opening a wound on his arm. He screamed in pain but kept going, knowing they could have had him; he'd surprised them but they were scared to attack him – or reluctant to do so.

He turned again, this time heading for the defensive tower. In it he could see archers taking aim and they were the best, he knew. Trained by the best. They never missed. Not with the amount of time they had to aim and fire.

Except he knew when they would fire. He knew that it took them a heartbeat to find their target and a second heartbeat to steady and breathe, then …

Fire.

He swerved and rolled. A volley of arrows slammed into the ground he'd just left, all but one missing him. One of the archers had checked his aim and the arrow grazed Altaïr's cheek. Blood sluiced down his face as he hit the ladder, scampering up it and reaching the first level, where a surprised bowman was dithering over whether to draw his sword. Altaïr dragged him from his perch, and he somersaulted to the ground below. He'd live.

Now Altaïr scrabbled up the second ladder. He was in pain. He was bleeding heavily. He reached the top of the tower from which he had jumped a lifetime ago, disgraced then as he was now. He hobbled to the platform and, as men scrambled to the top of the tower behind him, he spread out his arms.

And dropped.

53

10 August 1257

Altaïr means *us* to spread the word of the Assassin, that is his plan. And not just spread the word but set up an Order in the west.

Shame on me for taking so long to work it out, but now that I have, all seems clear: to us (specifically to *me*, it seems), he is entrusting the spirit of the Brotherhood. He is passing the torch to us.

We have had word that warlike Mongols are approaching the village and he thinks we should leave before hostilities commence. Maffeo, of course, seems rather titillated by the idea of witnessing the action and I rather feel that he would prefer it if we stayed. His former wanderlust? All but gone. Our roles are reversed, it seems, for now it is I who want to leave. Either I am more cowardly than he is or I have a more realistic idea of war's grim reality, for I find myself in accord with Altaïr. Masyaf under siege is no place for us.

In truth I am ready to go, whether the marauding party of Mongols arrives or not. I long for home, these hot nights. I miss my family: my wife and my son, Marco. He will be three years old in a few short months and I am painfully aware that I have seen so little of his very earliest years. I have missed his first steps, his first words.

In short, I feel that our time in Masyaf has reached its natural end. Moreover, the Master has said that he wishes to see us. There is something he must give to us, he says, in a ceremony he would like to conduct with other Assassins present. It is something that must be kept safe, he says, and out of the hands of the enemy: the Mongols or the Templars. This is what his tales have been leading to, I realize, and I have my suspicions as to what this precious thing might be. We shall see.

In the meantime, Maffeo is impatient to hear the rest of my tale, now so close to its conclusion. He pulled a face when I informed him that I planned to shift the narrative forward in time, from the moment that Altaïr leaped from the

ramparts of the citadel, a shamed and broken man, to a period some twenty years hence and not to Masyaf, but to a spot in the desert two days' ride away …

… to an endless plain at dusk, seemingly empty apart from a man on a horse leading another horse, the second nag laden with jugs and blankets.

From a distance the rider looked like a tradesman with his wares, and up close that was exactly what he was, sweating under his turban: a very tired and portly tradesman named Mukhlis.

So, when Mukhlis saw the waterhole in the distance he knew he had to lie down and rest. He'd hoped to reach home without stopping but he had no choice: he was exhausted. So many times during the journey the rhythm of the horse had lulled him and he had felt his chin tucking into his chest, his eyes fluttering and closing. It had been getting more and more difficult to resist sleep. Each time the motion of travel rocked him towards sleep, a fresh battle was fought between heart and head. His throat was parched. His robe hung heavy about him. Every bone and muscle in his body hummed with fatigue. The thought of wetting his lips and lying down with his *thawb* pulled around him, for just a few hours, perhaps, enough to restore some energy before resuming the journey home to Masyaf – well, the thought was almost too much for him.

What gave him pause, however, what made him fearful of stopping was the talk he had heard – talk of bandits abroad, thieves preying on tradesmen, taking their goods and slitting their throats, a band of brigands led by a cutthroat named Fahad, whose legendary brutality was matched only by that of his son, Bayhas.

Bayhas, they said, would hang his victims by their feet before slicing them from throat to belly and letting them die slowly, the wild dogs feasting on their dangling innards. Bayhas would do this, and he'd be laughing.

Mukhlis liked his guts inside his body. Neither did he have any desire to surrender all his worldly goods to brigands. After all, things in Masyaf were hard and getting harder. The villagers were forced to pay higher and higher levies to the castle on the promontory – the cost of protecting the community was rising, they were told; the Master was ruthless in demanding taxes from the people and would often send parties of Assassins down the slopes to force them to pay. Those who refused were likely to be beaten, then cast out of the gates, there to wander in the hope of being accepted at another settlement, or at the mercy of the bandits who made a home of the rocky plains surrounding Masyaf and seemed to become more and more audacious in their raids on travellers. Once, the Assassins – or the threat of them at least – had kept the trade routes safe. No longer, it seemed.

So, to return home penniless, unable to pay the tithes that Abbas demanded of the village merchants and the levies he wanted from the people, Mukhlis might find himself and his family tossed out of the village: him, his wife Aalia and his daughter Nada.

He was thinking about all of this as he approached the waterhole, still undecided whether or not to stop.

A horse was standing beneath a large fig tree that spread over the waterhole, a huge inviting canopy of cool shade and shelter. It was untethered but the blanket on its back showed that it belonged to someone, probably a fellow traveller stopping to drink the water, refill his flasks or, perhaps, like Mukhlis, lay down his head and rest. Even so, Mukhlis was nervous as he approached the waterhole. His horse sensed the proximity of water and snorted appreciatively, so that he had to rein her back from trotting up to the well, where he now saw a figure, curled up asleep. He slept with his head on his pack, his robe wrapped around him, his hood pulled up and his arms crossed over his chest. Little of his face was visible, but Mukhlis saw brown, weathered skin, wrinkled and scarred. He was an old man, in his late seventies or early eighties. Fascinated, Mukhlis studied the sleeper's face – the eyes snapped open.

Mukhlis recoiled a little, surprised and frightened. The old man's eyes were sharp and watchful. He remained absolutely still and Mukhlis realized that, although he himself was much younger, the stranger was not at all intimidated by him.

'I'm sorry if I disturbed you,' said Mukhlis, inclining his head, his voice wavering slightly. The stranger said nothing, just watched as Mukhlis dismounted, then led his horse to the well and retrieved the leather bucket so that they could drink. For a moment or so the only sound was the soft bump of the bucket on the wall of the well as the water was fetched, then the slurping as the horse drank. Mukhlis drank too. He sipped then gulped, wetting his beard and wiping his face. He filled his flasks and took water to the second horse, tethering them both. When he looked again at the stranger he had fallen asleep once more. All that had changed about him was that he no longer lay with his arms crossed. Instead they were by his head, resting on the pack he was using as a pillow. Mukhlis took a blanket from his own pack, found a spot on the other side of the well, and lay down to sleep.

How much later was it that he heard movement and opened his eyes blearily to see a figure standing over him? A figure lit by the first rays of the morning sun, his black hair and beard wild and unkempt, a gold earring in one ear, and grinning a wide, evil grin. Mukhlis tried to scramble to his feet but the man

dropped to his haunches, a glittering dagger going to Mukhlis's neck, so that Mukhlis went still with fright, a whimper escaping from his lips.

'I am Bayhas,' said the man, still smiling. 'I am the last face you will ever see.'

'No,' bleated Mukhlis, but Bayhas was already hauling him to his feet and now the trader saw that Bayhas had two companions, who were stripping his horses of his goods and transferring them to their own beasts.

He looked for the sleeping old man but he was no longer there, although Mukhlis could see his horse. Had they killed him already? Was he lying with his throat slit?

'Rope,' called Bayhas. He still had the dagger held to Mukhlis's throat as one of his companions tossed him a coil of rope. Like Bayhas, he wore black and had an unkempt beard, his hair covered with a *keffiyeh*. On his back was a longbow. The third man had long hair and no beard, a wide scimitar at his belt, and was busily rooting through Mukhlis's packs, discarding unwanted items in the sand.

'No,' cried Mukhlis, seeing a painted stone fall to the dirt. It had been given to him by his daughter as a good-luck gift on the day he had left, and the sight of it tossed to the ground by the robber was too much for him. He pulled away from Bayhas's grip and rushed to Long Hair, who moved to meet him with a smile, then felled him with a vicious punch to the windpipe. The three robbers roared with laughter as Mukhlis writhed and choked in the dirt.

'What is it?' jeered Long Hair, bending to him. He saw where Mukhlis was looking and picked up the stone, reading the words Nada had painted on. ' "Good luck, Papa." Is this it? Is this what's making you so brave all of a sudden, Papa?'

Mukhlis reached for the stone, desperate to have it, but Long Hair batted his hand away with disdain, then rubbed the stone on his backside – laughing more as Mukhlis howled in outrage – and tossed it into the well.

'Plop,' he mocked.

'You …' started Mukhlis. 'You …'

'Tie his legs,' he heard from behind him. Bayhas threw Long Hair the rope and came round, dropping to his haunches and placing the tip of his knife close to Mukhlis's eyeball.

'Where were you heading, Papa?' he asked.

'To Damascus,' lied Mukhlis.

Bayhas sliced his cheek with the knife and he screamed in pain. 'Where were you going?' he demanded again.

'His cloth is from Masyaf,' said Long Hair, who was winding the rope around Mukhlis's legs.

‘Masyaf, eh?’ said Bayhas. ‘Once you might have counted on the Assassins for support, but no longer. Perhaps we should pay it a visit. We may find ourselves a grieving widow in need of comfort. What do you say, Papa? When we’ve finished with you.’

Now Long Hair stood and tossed the end of the rope over a branch of the fig tree, hauling back on it so that Mukhlis was pulled up. His world went upside down. He whimpered as Long Hair tied the end of the rope to the well arch, securing him there. Now Bayhas reached and spun him. He revolved, seeing the bowman standing some feet away, rocking back on his heels with laughter. Bayhas and Long Hair closer and laughing too. Bayhas bending to him.

Still revolving, he saw the wall of the well go by, then came round again to see the three robbers, Long Hair and Bayhas, behind them the third man, and –

A pair of legs appeared from the tree behind the third man.

But Mukhlis was still spinning and the wall of the well went by again. He revolved, slowing now, to the front, where all three robbers were oblivious that another man was among them, standing behind them. A man whose face was mostly hidden beneath the cowl of the robe he wore, his head slightly bowed, his arms spread, almost as though in supplication. The old man.

‘Stop,’ said the old man. Like his face, his voice was weathered with age.

All three robbers turned to face him, tensing, ready to cut down the intruder.

And all three began to snigger.

‘What is this?’ scoffed Bayhas. ‘An aged man comes to stop our fun? What do you plan to do, old man? Bore us to death with your tales of the old days? Fart at us?’

His two companions laughed.

‘Cut him down,’ said the old man, indicating where Mukhlis still hung upside down, swaying on the rope. ‘At once.’

‘And why would I want to do that?’ asked Bayhas.

‘Because I say so,’ rasped the old man.

‘And who might you be to demand this of me?’

The old man flicked his hand.

Snick.

54

The bowman reached for his bow but in two strides Altaïr reached him, swiping his blade in a wide arc that opened the man's neck, slicing the bow in half and shortening his headdress with one cut. There was a soft clatter as the brigand's bow dropped to the ground, followed by a thump as his body joined it.

Altaïr – who had not known combat for two decades – stood with his shoulders heaving, watching Bayhas and Long Hair as their expressions changed from mocking to wary. At his feet the bowman was twitching and gurgling, his blood blotted by the sand. Without taking his eyes from Bayhas and Long Hair, Altaïr dropped to one knee and drove his blade into him, silencing him. Fear was his greatest weapon now, he knew. These men had youth and speed on their side. They were savage and ruthless, accustomed to death. Altaïr had experience. He hoped it would be enough.

Long Hair and Bayhas shared a look. They were no longer smiling. For a moment the only sound around the waterhole was the soft creaking of the rope on the branch of the fig tree, Mukhlis watching everything upside down. His arms were untied and he wondered whether to try and to get free but judged it better not to draw attention to himself.

The two thugs moved apart, wanting to outflank Altaïr, who watched the ground open up between them, revealing the merchant hanging upside down. Long Hair passed his scimitar from hand to hand with a soft slapping sound. Bayhas chewed the inside of his cheek.

Long Hair took a step forward, jabbing with the scimitar. The air seemed to vibrate with the sound of ringing steel as Altaïr stopped him with his blade, sweeping his arm to push the scimitar aside, feeling his muscles complain. If the thieves made short attacks he wasn't sure how long he could last. He was an old man. Old men tended gardens or spent afternoons pondering in their studies, reading and thinking about those they had loved and lost: they didn't get involved in swordfights. Especially not when they were outnumbered by younger opponents. He stabbed towards Bayhas, wanting to stop the leader outflanking him and it worked – but Bayhas darted close enough with the dagger to slice Altaïr at the chest, opening a wound, drawing the first blood. Altaïr

attacked in his turn, and they clashed, trading blows but giving Long Hair a chance to step in before Altaïr could ward him off. Long Hair swiped wildly with his blade, making a large cut in Altaïr's leg.

Big. Deep. It gushed blood and Altaïr almost stumbled. He limped to his side, trying to bring the well to his flank in order to defend from the front only. He got there, the wall of the waterhole at his side, the hanging merchant at his back.

'Have strength,' he heard the merchant say quietly, 'and know that whatever happens you have my gratitude and love, whether in this life or the next.'

Altaïr nodded but did not turn, watching instead the two thugs in front of him. Seeing Altaïr bleed had cheered them and, encouraged, they came forward with more stabbing, stinging sorties. Altaïr fought off three offensives, picking up new wounds, bleeding profusely now, limping, out of breath. Fear was no longer his weapon. That advantage was lost to him. All he had now were long-dormant skills and instincts, and he cast his mind back to some of his greatest battles: overcoming Talal's men, beating Moloch, defeating the Templar knights in the Jerusalem cemetery. The warrior who had fought those battles would have sliced these two dead in seconds.

But that warrior lived in the past. He had aged. Grief and seclusion had weakened him. He had spent twenty years mourning Maria, obsessed with the Apple. His combat skills, great as they were, had been allowed to wither and, so it seemed, die.

He felt blood in his boots. His hands were slick with it. He was swinging wildly with his blade, not so much defending as trying to swat his attackers away. He thought of his pack, secured in the fig tree, the Apple inside. To grasp the Apple would be to emerge the victor, but it was too far away and, anyway, he'd vowed never to use it again; he'd left it in the tree for that very reason, to keep its temptation out of reach. But the truth was that if he'd been able to reach it he would have used it now, rather than die like this and surrender the merchant to them, surely condemning him to an even more painful and tortured death because of Altaïr's actions.

Yes, he would have used the Apple, because he was lost. And he'd allowed them to turn him again, he realized. Long Hair came at him from the periphery of his vision and he shouted with the effort of fending him off, Long Hair meeting his parries with attacking strikes – one, two, three – finding a way beneath Altaïr's guard and cutting yet another wound on his flank, a deep slash that bled copiously at once. Altaïr staggered, gasping with the pain. Better to die this way, he supposed, than to surrender meekly. Better to die fighting.

Long Hair came forward now and there was another clash of the sword. Altaïr was wounded again, this time on his good leg. He dropped to his knees, his arms

hanging, his useless blade gouging nothing but the sand.

Long Hair stepped forward but Bayhas stopped him. ‘Leave him to me,’ he ordered.

Dimly, Altaïr found himself thinking of another time, a thousand lives ago, that his opponent had said the same, and how on that occasion he had made the knight pay for his arrogance. That satisfaction would be denied him this time, because Bayhas was coming forward to Altaïr, who knelt, swaying and defeated, in the dirt, his head hanging. He tried to order his legs to stand, but they would not obey. He tried to lift his blade hand but he could not. He saw the dagger coming towards him and was able to lift his head high enough to see Bayhas’s teeth bared, his gold earring shining in the early-morning sun …

Then the merchant was bucking, swinging and had embraced Bayhas upside down and from behind, momentarily arresting his progress. With a great shout, a final burst of effort, energy summoned from he knew not where, Altaïr thrust upward, his blade slicing up and into Bayhas’s stomach, opening a vertical gash that ended almost at his throat. At the same time Mukhlis had grabbed the dagger just before it dropped from Bayhas’s loosening fingers, jerking upwards and slicing at the rope that held him. He dropped, smashing his side painfully against the well wall, but scrambled to his feet and stood side by side with his saviour.

Altaïr was bent almost double, dying on his feet. But he raised his blade and stared narrow-eyed at Long Hair, who suddenly found himself outnumbered and unnerved. Instead of attacking, he backed away until he reached a horse. Without taking his eyes off Altaïr and Mukhlis, he mounted it. He stared at them and they stared back. Then he very deliberately drew a finger across his throat, and rode away.

‘Thank you,’ said Mukhlis to Altaïr, breathlessly, but the Assassin didn’t answer. He had folded, unconscious, to the sand.

55

It was a week later when the envoy from the brigand leader arrived. The people from the village watched him ride through the township and to the hills leading up to the citadel. He was one of Fahad's men, they said, and the wiser among them thought they knew the nature of his business at the fortress. Two days before, Fahad's men had come to the village with news of a reward offered for anyone who identified the man who had killed Fahad's son, Bayhas. He had been helped by a merchant from Masyaf, they said, and the merchant would be unharmed if he produced the cowardly dog who had cut down the brigand leader's beloved son. The villagers had shaken their heads and gone about their business, and the men had left empty-handed, muttering dark warnings about their planned return.

And this was it, said the gossips – at least, this was a precursor to it. Even Fahad wouldn't dare send men into the village when it enjoyed the protection of the Assassins: he would have to ask the permission of the Master. Even Fahad would not have dared make the request of Altaïr or Al Mualim, but Abbas was a different matter. Abbas was weak and could be bought.

So it was that the envoy returned. On the outward journey he had looked serious, if disdainful of the villagers who watched him pass, but now he smirked at them and drew his finger across his throat.

'It seems the Master has given Fahad his blessing to come into the village,' said Mukhlis, later that night, as the candles burned down. He sat at the bedside of the stranger, talking more to himself than to the man in the bed, who had not regained consciousness since the battle at the waterhole. Afterwards Mukhlis had manhandled him over the saddle of his second horse and brought him home to Masyaf in order that he might be healed. Aalia and Nada had attended to him, and for three days they had wondered if he would live or die. Blood loss had left him as pale as mist and he had lain in bed – Aalia and Mukhlis having given up theirs for him – looking almost serene, like a corpse, as though at any moment he might have departed the world. On the third day his colour began to improve. Aalia had told Mukhlis so when he returned from market, and Mukhlis had taken his usual place on a chair by the side of the bed to speak to his saviour in the

hope of reviving him. He'd got into the habit of recounting his day, occasionally talking of significant things in the hope of exciting the patient's unconscious mind and bringing him round.

'Abbas has his price, it seems,' he said now. He looked sideways at the stranger, who lay on his back, his wounds healing nicely, growing stronger by the day. 'Master Altaïr would have died rather than allow such a thing,' he said.

He leaned forward, watching the figure in the bed very carefully. 'The Master, Altaïr Ibn-La'Ahad.'

For the first time since he had been brought to Mukhlis's home the stranger's eyes flicked open.

It was the reaction he'd hoped for, but even so Mukhlis was taken aback, watching as the patient's cloudy eyes slowly regained their light.

'It's you, isn't it?' whispered Mukhlis, as the stranger blinked, then turned his gaze on him. 'You are him, aren't you? You're Altaïr.'

Altaïr nodded. Tears pricked Mukhlis's eyes and he dropped from his seat to the stone floor, grasping one of Altaïr's hands in both of his own.

'You've come back to us,' he said, between sobs. 'You've come to save us.' There was a pause. '*Have* you come to save us?'

'Do you need saving?' said Altaïr.

'We do. Was it your intention to come to Masyaf when we met?'

Altaïr thought. 'When I left Alamut it was inevitable I would find myself here. The only question was when.'

'You were in Alamut?'

'These past twenty years or so.'

'They said you were dead. That the morning Maria died you threw yourself from the citadel tower.'

'I did throw myself off the citadel tower,' Altaïr smiled grimly, 'but I lived. I made it to the river outside the village. By chance Darim was there. He was returning from Alamut, where he had found Sef's wife and children. He retrieved me and took me to them.'

'They said you were dead,' said Mukhlis again.

'They?'

Mukhlis waved a hand that was meant to indicate the citadel. 'The Assassins.'

'It suited them to say so, but they knew I was not.'

He disentangled his hand from Mukhlis's grasp, pulled himself to a sitting position and swung his legs out of the bed. He looked at his feet, at their wrinkled old skin. Every inch of his body sang with pain but he felt … better. His robe had been washed and replaced on him. He pulled his hood over his head, liking the feel of it and breathing in the scent of the clean cloth.

He put his hands to his face and felt that his beard had been tended. Not far away were his boots, and on a table by the side of the bed he saw his blade mechanism, its new design gleaned from the Apple. It looked impossibly advanced, and he thought of the other designs he had discovered. He needed the assistance of a blacksmith to make the objects. But first …

'My pack?' he asked of Mukhlis, who had scrambled to his feet. 'Where is my pack?'

Wordlessly, Mukhlis indicated where it sat on the stone at the head of the bed and Altaïr glanced at its familiar shape. 'Did you look inside?' he asked.

Mukhlis shook his head firmly and Altaïr looked at him searchingly. Then, believing him, he relaxed and reached for his boots, pulling them on, wincing as he did so.

'I have you to thank for tending me,' he said. 'I would be dead by the waterhole were it not for you.'

Scoffing, Mukhlis retook his seat. 'My wife and daughter cared for you, and *I* must thank *you*. You saved me from a grisly death at the hands of those bandits.' He leaned forward. 'Your actions were those of the Altaïr Ibn-La'Ahad of legend. I've told everyone.'

'People know I'm here?'

Mukhlis spread his hands. 'Of course. The whole village knows the tale of the hero who delivered me from the hands of death. Everybody believes it was you.'

'And what makes them think that?' asked Altaïr.

Mukhlis said nothing. Instead he indicated with his chin the low table where Altaïr's blade mechanism shone dully, wicked and oiled.

Altaïr considered. 'You told them about the blade?'

Mukhlis thought. 'Well, yes,' he said, 'of course. Why?'

'Word will reach the citadel. They will come looking for me.'

'They will not be the only ones,' said Mukhlis, ruefully.

'What do you mean?'

'A messenger from the father of the man you killed visited the fortress earlier.'

'And who was the man I killed?'

'A vicious cutthroat called Bayhas.'

'And his father?'

'Fahad, leader of a band of brigands who roam the desert. It's said they are camped two or three days' ride away. It's from there the envoy came. They say he was asking the Master's blessing to come to the village and hunt the killer.'

'The Master?' said Altaïr, sharply. 'Abbas?'

Mukhlis nodded. 'A reward was offered for the killer, but the villagers spurned it. Abbas has perhaps not been so steadfast.'

‘Then the people are of good heart,’ said Altaïr, ‘and their leader is not.’

‘Truer words rarely spoken,’ agreed Mukhlis. ‘He takes our money and gives us nothing in return, where once the citadel was the heart of the community from which came strength, guidance …’

‘And protection,’ said Altaïr, with a half-smile.

‘That too,’ acknowledged Mukhlis. ‘All those things left with you, Altaïr, to be replaced by … corruption and paranoia. They say that Abbas was forced to quell an uprising after you left, a rebellion of Assassins loyal to you and Malik; that he had the ringleaders put to death; that he fears a repeat of the insurrection. His paranoia makes him stay in his tower day and night, imagining plots and putting to death those he thinks responsible. The tenets of the Order are crumbling around him just as surely as the fortress itself falls into disrepair. They say he has a recurring dream. That one day Altaïr Ibn-La’Ahad returns from exile in Alamut with …’ he paused, looking at Altaïr askance and casting a glance at the pack ‘… an artefact capable of defeating him … Is there such a thing? Do you plan an attack?’

‘Even if there was, it is not an artefact that will defeat Abbas. It is belief – belief in ourselves and in the Creed – that will accomplish that.’

‘Whose faith, Altaïr?’

Altaïr waved an arm. ‘Yours. That of the people and of the Assassins.’

‘And how will you restore it?’ asked Mukhlis.

‘By example,’ replied Altaïr, ‘a little at a time.’

The next day Altaïr went out into the village where he began not simply to preach the way of the Assassins but to demonstrate it.

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There had been fights in which Altaïr had had to intervene, disputes between traders that had required his moderation, land arguments between neighbours, but none had been as thorny as that of the two women who appeared to be fighting over a man. The man in question, Aaron, sat on a bench in the shade, cowering as the two women argued. Mukhlis, who had walked the village with Altaïr as he went about his business, was trying to intercede, while Altaïr stood at one remove, his arms folded, patiently waiting for a break in hostilities so that he might speak to them. He'd already decided what to say: Aaron would have to exercise free will in this instance, whether he liked it or not. Altaïr's real concerns lay with the boy, whose fever had yet to break and to whom he had administered a potion, its recipe, of course, gleaned from the Apple.

Or with the basket weaver who was creating new tools for himself to specifications given to him by Altaïr, who had transcribed them from the Apple.

Or to the blacksmith, who had cast his eye over the drawings Altaïr had given him, turned them upside down and squinted at them, then laid them out on a table so that Altaïr could point out exactly what needed forging. Soon the Assassin would have new equipment; new weapons, the like of which had never been seen.

Or to the man who had been watching him these past few days, who had moved with him like a shadow, staying out of sight, or so he thought. Altaïr had seen him at once, of course. He had noted his bearing, had known he was an Assassin.

It had had to happen, of course. Abbas would have sent his agents into the village in order to learn about the stranger who fought with the hidden blade of the Assassin. Abbas would surely come to the conclusion that Altaïr had returned to reclaim the Order. Maybe he hoped that the brigands would kill Altaïr for him; maybe he would send a man down the slopes to kill him. Perhaps this shadow was also Altaïr's Assassin.

Still the women argued. Mukhlis said, from the side of his mouth, 'Master, it seems I was mistaken. These women are not arguing about who should *have* the unfortunate Aaron, but who should *take* him.'

Altaïr chuckled. ‘My judgment would remain the same,’ he said, casting an amused look to where Aaron sat chewing his fingernails. ‘It is for the young man to decide his own destiny.’ He stole a glance at his shadow, who sat in the shade of the trees, mud-coloured robes pulled around him, looking for all the world like a snoozing villager.

To Mukhlis he said, ‘I shall return presently. Their talk is giving me a thirst.’

He turned and left the small group, some of whom were about to follow until Mukhlis surreptitiously waved them back.

Altaïr sensed rather than saw his shadow stand also, following him as he walked into a square and to the fountain at its centre. There he bent, drank, and stood, pretending to take in the view over the village below. Then …

‘It’s all right,’ he said, to the man he knew stood behind him. ‘If you were going to kill me you would have done it by now.’

‘You were just going to let me do it?’

Altaïr chuckled. ‘I have not spent my life walking the path of a warrior in order to let myself be taken by a young pup at a fountainhead.’

‘You heard me?’

‘Of course I heard you. I heard you approach with all the stealth of an elephant and I heard that you favour your left side. Were you to attack I should move to my right in order to meet your weaker side.’

‘Wouldn’t I anticipate that?’

‘Well, that would depend on the target. You would, of course, know your target well and be aware of their combat skills.’

‘I know that this one has combat skills unmatched, Altaïr Ibn-La’Ahad.’

‘Do you indeed? You would have been but a child when I last called Masyaf my own.’

Now Altaïr turned to face the stranger, who pulled down his hood to reveal the face of a young man, perhaps twenty years old, with a dark beard. He had a set to his jaw and eyes that Altaïr recognized.

‘I was,’ said the boy. ‘I was a new-born.’

‘Then were you not indoctrinated against me?’ said Altaïr, jutting his chin towards the citadel on the promontory above them. It crouched there as if watching them.

‘Some are more easily indoctrinated than others,’ said the boy. ‘There are many who have remained loyal to the old codes, and greater numbers, as the pernicious effects of the new ways have become more pronounced. But I have even more reason to remain loyal than most.’

The two Assassins stood facing each other by the fountainhead, and Altaïr sensed his world lurch a little. Suddenly he felt almost faint. ‘What is your

name?’ he asked, and his voice sounded disembodied to his own ears.

‘I have two names,’ said the boy. ‘I have the name by which I’m known to most of the Order, which is Tazim. But I have another name, my given name, given to me by my mother to honour my father. He died when I was but a baby, put to death on the orders of Abbas. His name was …’

‘Malik.’ Altaïr caught his breath and came forward, tears pricking his eyes as he took the boy by the shoulders. ‘My child,’ he exclaimed. ‘I should have known. You have your father’s eyes.’ He laughed. ‘His stealth I’m not so sure about, but … you have his spirit. I didn’t know – I never knew he had a son.’

‘My mother was sent away from here after he was imprisoned. As a young man I returned to join the Order.’

‘To seek revenge?’

‘Eventually, maybe. Whatever best suited his memory. Now that you have come, I see the way.’

Altaïr put an arm around his shoulders, steered him from the fountain, and they crossed the square, talking intently.

‘How are your combat skills?’ he asked the young Malik.

‘Under Abbas such things have been neglected, but I have trained. Assassin knowledge has barely advanced in the last twenty years, though.’

Altaïr chuckled. ‘Not here, perhaps. But here.’ He tapped the side of his head. ‘*Here* Assassin learning has progressed tenfold. I have such things to show the Order. Plans. Stratagem. Designs for new weapons. Even now the village blacksmith forges them for me.’

Respectful villagers moved out of their way. All knew of Altaïr now, and here, in the foothills of the fortress at least, he was the Master once again.

‘And you say there are others in the castle loyal to me?’ said Altaïr.

‘There are as many who hate Abbas as serve him. More so, now that I have been reporting on what I have seen in the village. News that the great Altaïr has returned is spreading slowly but surely.’

‘Good,’ said Altaïr. ‘And could these supporters be persuaded to rally, so that we might march upon the castle?’

The young Malik stopped and looked at Altaïr, squinting as though to check the older man wasn’t joking. Then he grinned. ‘You mean to do it. You really mean to do it. When?’

‘The brigand Fahad will be bringing his men into the village soon,’ he said. ‘We need to be in control before that happens.’

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The next morning, as day broke, Mukhlis, Aalia and Nada went from house to house, informing the people that the Master was to march up the hill. Alive with anticipation, the people gathered in the marketplace, standing in groups or sitting on low walls. After some time, Altaïr joined them. He wore his white robes and a sash. Those who looked closely could see the ring of his wrist mechanism on his finger. He moved into the centre of the square, Mukhlis standing to one side, a trusted lieutenant, and waited.

What would Maria have said to him now? wondered Altaïr, as he waited. The boy Malik: Altaïr had trusted him immediately. He'd placed such faith in him that if he were to prove treacherous Altaïr would be as good as dead, and his plans to regain the Order shown as nothing more than the deluded fantasies of an old man. He thought of those he had trusted before, who had betrayed him. Would Maria have advised caution now? Would she have told him he was foolish to be so unquestioning on such scant evidence? Or would she have said, as she had once, 'Trust your instincts, Altaïr. Al Mualim's teachings gave you wisdom; his betrayal set you on the path to maturity.'

Oh, and I am so much wiser now, my love, he thought to her – to the wisp of her he kept safe in his memory.

She would have approved, he knew, of what he had done with the Apple, of the years spent squeezing it of juice, learning from it. She would not have approved of the blame he had shouldered for her death; the shame he felt at letting his actions be guided by anger. No, she would not have approved of that. What would she have said? That English expression she had: 'Take hold of yourself.'

He almost laughed to think of it. *Take hold of yourself*. He had in the end, of course, but it had taken him years to do it – years of hating the Apple, hating the sight of it, even the thought of it, the malignant power that lay dormant within the ageless, sleek mosaic of its shell. He would stare at it, brooding, for hours, reliving the pain it had brought him.

Neglected, unable to bear the weight of Altaïr's suffering, Sef's wife and two daughters had left. He'd had word that they had settled in Alexandria. A year

later Darim had left, too, driven away by his father's remorse and his obsession with the Apple. He had travelled to France and England to warn leaders there that the Mongols were on the march. Left alone, Altaïr's torment had worsened. Long nights he would spend staring at the Apple, as though he and it were two adversaries about to do battle – as though if he slept or even took his eyes from it, it might pounce on him.

In the end he had thought of that night in the garden at Masyaf, his mentor Al Mualim slain on the marble terrace, the waterfall bubbling in the background. He remembered holding the Apple for the first time and feeling from it something not evil but benign. The images it had produced. Strange futuristic pictures of cultures far removed from his own in time and space, beyond the sphere of his knowledge. That night in the garden he had instinctively understood its capacity for good. Ever since then, it had shown only its malign aspects, but that great wisdom was in there somewhere. It had needed to be located and coaxed out. It had needed an agent for its release – and Altaïr had managed to harness its power once before.

Then he had been consumed with grief for Al Mualim. Now he was consumed with grief for his family. Perhaps the Apple first had to take in order to give.

Whatever the answer, his studies had begun and journal after journal was filled with his writings: page after page of philosophies, ideologies, designs, drawings, schematics, memories. Untold candles burned down as he scratched away feverishly, stopping only to piss. For days on end he would write, then for days on end he would leave his desk, riding out from Alamut alone, on Apple errands, collecting ingredients, gathering supplies. Once, even, the Apple had directed him to a series of artefacts that he retrieved and hid, telling no one of their nature or their whereabouts.

He had not stopped mourning, of course. He still blamed himself for Maria's death, but he had learned from it. He felt now a purer kind of grief: a yearning for Maria and Sef, an ache that never seemed to leave him, that one day was as sharp and keen as a blade slicing a thousand cuts on his heart, and the next was a nauseous hollow sensation, as if a sick bird were trying to unfurl its wings in his stomach.

Sometimes he smiled, though, because he thought Maria would have approved of him mourning her. It would have appealed to the part of her that had stayed a spoilt English noblewoman, who had been as adept at fixing a man with a haughty stare as she was of defeating him in combat, her withering put-downs as cutting as her blade. And, of course, she would have approved that he had finally managed to take hold of himself, but most of all she would have approved of what he was doing now: taking his knowledge and learning and bringing them

back to the Order. Had he known when he ended his exile that he had been heading back to Masyaf for that reason? He still wasn't sure. All he knew was that, once here, there had been no other option. He had visited the spot where they had buried her; Malik's gravestone was not far away, tended by young Malik. Altaïr had realized that Maria, Sef and Malik, his mother and father, even Al Mualim, were all lost to him for ever. The Brotherhood, though, he could take back.

But only if the young Malik was as good as his word. And standing there, feeling the excitement and expectation of the crowd like a weight he must bear upon his back, Mukhlis hovering nearby, he began to wonder. His eyes fixed on the citadel, he waited for the gates to open and the men to appear. Malik had said there would be at least twenty, all of whom supported Altaïr with the same fervency he did. Twenty warriors and, with the support of the people, Altaïr thought it was enough to overcome the thirty or forty Assassins still loyal to Abbas.

He wondered if Abbas was up there now, in the Master's tower, squinting to make out what was happening below. He hoped so.

Throughout his life, Altaïr had refused to find gratification in the death of another, but Abbas? Despite the pity he felt for him, there were the deaths of Sef, Malik and Maria to take into account; there was also Abbas's destruction of the Order. Altaïr had promised himself that he would take no pleasure – not even satisfaction – from Abbas's death.

But he would take pleasure and satisfaction from the absence of Abbas when he had killed him. He could allow himself that.

But only if the gates opened and his allies appeared. Around him the crowds were becoming restless. He felt the confidence and assurance with which he'd awoken slowly ebbing away.

Then he became aware of a buzz of excitement among the villagers and his eyes went from the gates of the castle – still resolutely closed – to the square. A man in white seemed to materialize from the crowd. A man who walked up to Altaïr with his head bent, then removed his hood, grinning at him. It was young Malik. And behind came others. All, like him, appearing from within the crowd as though suddenly becoming visible. At his side, Mukhlis gasped. The square was suddenly full of men in white robes. And Altaïr began to laugh. Surprise, relief and joy in that laugh as each man came to him, inclining his head in respect, showing him blade or bow or throwing knife. Showing him loyalty.

Altaïr grasped young Malik by the shoulders and his eyes shone. 'I take it back,' he said. 'You and all your men – your stealth is unmatched.'

Grinning, Malik bowed his head. ‘Master, we should leave at once. Abbas will soon become aware of our absence.

‘So be it,’ said Altaïr, and he climbed to the low wall of the fountain, waving away Mukhlis, who had come to his aid. Now he addressed the crowd: ‘For too long the castle on the hill has been a dark and forbidding place, and today I hope to make it a beacon of light once again – with your help.’ There was a low murmur of appreciation and Altaïr quietened them. ‘What we will *not* do, though, is welcome our new dawn through a veil of Assassin blood. Those who remain loyal to Abbas are our enemies today but tomorrow they will be our companions. Their friendship can only be won if our victory is merciful. Kill *only* if it is absolutely necessary. We come to bring peace to Masyaf, not death.’

With that he stepped down from the wall and walked from the square, the Assassins and villagers forming up behind him. The Assassins pulled their cowls over their heads. They looked grim and purposeful. The people hung further back: excited, nervous, fearful. So much depended on the outcome.

Altaïr climbed the slopes that, as a child, he had raced up and down, he and Abbas together. As an Assassin, he had run up and down, training, or on errands for the Master, leaving for a mission or returning from one. Now he felt the age in his bones and in his muscles, struggling a little up the slopes, but kept going.

A small party of Abbas’s loyalists met them on the hills, a scouting party sent to test their mettle. At first those men with Altaïr seemed reluctant to engage them: these were comrades they had lived and trained with, after all. Friends were pitched against each other; no doubt, if the fighting continued, family members might find themselves face to face. For long moments the outnumbered scouting party and Altaïr’s supporters faced off. The scouting party had the advantage of being on higher ground but otherwise they were lambs sent to the slaughter.

Altaïr’s eyes went up to where he could just see the peak of the Master’s tower. Abbas would be able to see him now, surely. He would have seen the people coming up the hill towards him. Altaïr’s eyes went from the citadel to the scouts, sent to fight in the name of their corrupt master.

‘There is to be no killing,’ repeated Altaïr, to his men, and Malik nodded.

One of the scouts grinned nastily. ‘Then you won’t get far, old man.’ He darted forward with his sword swinging, coming for Altaïr, perhaps hoping to strike at the roots of the rebellion: kill Altaïr, stop the uprising.

In the flap of a hummingbird’s wings, the Assassin had spun away from the attack, drawn his sword and rolled around the forward impetus of his assailant’s body to grab him from behind.

The scout's sword dropped as he felt Altaïr's blade held to his throat, and he whimpered.

'There will be no killing in the name of *this* old man,' murmured Altaïr, into the scout's ear, and propelled him forward to Malik, who caught him and wrestled him to the ground. The other scouts came forward but with less enthusiasm, no heart for the fight. They all but allowed themselves to be captured; in moments they were either captive or unconscious.

Altaïr watched the short skirmish. He looked at his hand where the scout's sword had nicked it, and surreptitiously wiped off the blood. You were slow, he thought. Next time leave the fighting to the younger men.

Even so, he hoped Abbas had been watching. Now men were gathering on the ramparts. He hoped also that they had seen the events on the hill, the scouting party treated mercifully.

They continued further up the slope, coming to the upland just as the gates to the fortress finally opened. More Assassins poured through them, yelling and ready for the fight.

Behind him he heard the villagers scream and scatter, although Mukhlis was urging them to stay. Altaïr turned to see him throw up his hands, but he couldn't blame the people for their loss of resolve. They all knew of the fearsome savagery of the Assassin. No doubt they had never seen two opposing Assassin armies fight and neither did they want to. What they saw were marauding Assassins come howling from the gates with bared teeth and flashing swords, their boots drumming on the turf. They saw Altaïr's supporters crouch and tense, readying themselves for action. And they took shelter, some running for cover behind the watchtower, others retreating down the hill. There was a great shout and a crash of steel as the two sides met. Altaïr had Malik as his bodyguard, and he kept an eye on the ramparts as the battle raged – the ramparts where the archers stood, perhaps ten of them. If they opened fire the battle was surely lost.

Now he saw Abbas.

And Abbas saw him.

For a moment the two commanders regarded one another, Abbas on the ramparts, Altaïr down below – strong and still as rock as the battle whirled around him – the best of childhood friends turned the bitterest of enemies. Then the moment was broken as Abbas yelled at the archers to fire. Altaïr saw uncertainty on their faces as they raised their bows.

'No one must die,' called Altaïr, entreating his own men, knowing that the way to win over the archers was by example. Abbas was prepared to sacrifice Assassins; Altaïr was not, and he could only hope that the hearts of the archers were true. He prayed that his supporters would show restraint, that they would

give the archers no reason to open fire. He saw one of his men fall, howling, his throat open, and straight away the loyalist Assassin responsible was attacking another.

‘Him,’ he instructed Malik, pointing in the direction of the battle. ‘Take him, Malik, but be merciful I urge you.’

Malik joined the battle and the loyalist was pushed back, Malik swiping at his legs. When his opponent fell, he straddled him and delivered not a killing blow but a strike from the hilt of his sword that knocked him senseless.

Altaïr looked up to the ramparts again. He saw two of the archers lower their bows, shaking their heads. He saw Abbas produce a dagger – his father’s dagger – and threaten the men with it, but again they shook their heads, lowering their bows and placing their hands to the hilts of their swords. Abbas wheeled, screaming at the archers along the rampart behind him, ordering them to cut down the defectors. But they, too, were lowering their bows and Altaïr’s heart leaped. Now he was urging his men forward, to the gates. Still the battle continued but the loyalists were slowly becoming aware of events on the ramparts. Even as they fought they exchanged uncertain glances, and one by one they stepped back from combat, dropping their swords, arms held out, surrendering. The way was clear for Altaïr’s party to advance on the castle.

He led his men to the gates and rapped on the door with his fist. Behind him assembled the Assassins – and the villagers were returning, too, so the upland was thronged with people. From the other side of the castle gate there was a strange stillness. A hush descended over Altaïr’s people, the air crackling with expectation, until suddenly bolts were thrown and the great castle gates swung wide, opened by guards who dropped their swords and bent their heads in deference to Altaïr.

He nodded in return, stepped over the threshold, under the arch, and walked across the courtyard to the Master’s tower. Behind him came his people; they spread out and flowed around the edges of the courtyard; archers descended the ladders from the ramparts to join them, and the faces of families and servants were pressed to the windows of the towers overlooking the grounds. All wanted to witness Altaïr’s return, to see his confrontation with Abbas.

He climbed the steps to the platform, then moved into the entrance hall. Ahead of him, Abbas stood on the steps, his face dark and drawn, desperation and defeat all over him, like a fever.

‘It is over, Abbas,’ called Altaïr. ‘Order those who are still loyal to you to surrender.’

Abbas scoffed, ‘Never.’ At that moment the tower opened and the last of the loyalists came from the side rooms into the hall: a dozen or so Assassins and

manservants. Some had skittering, frightened eyes. Others were fierce and determined. The battle was not over yet.

‘Tell your men to stand down,’ commanded Altaïr. He half turned to indicate the courtyard, where the crowds were gathered. ‘You cannot possibly prevail.’

‘I am defending the citadel, Altaïr,’ said Abbas, ‘to the last man. Would you not do the same?’

‘I would have defended the *Order*, Abbas,’ snarled Altaïr. ‘Instead you have sacrificed everything we stand for. You sacrificed my wife and son on the altar of your own spite – your blank refusal to accept the truth.’

‘You mean my father? The lies you told about him.’

‘Isn’t that why we’re standing here? Isn’t that the wellspring of your hatred that has flowed through the years, poisoning us all?’

Abbas was trembling. His knuckles were white on the balustrade of the balcony. ‘My father left the Order,’ he said. ‘He would never have killed himself.’

‘He killed himself, Abbas. He killed himself with the dagger that you have concealed within your robe. He killed himself because he had more honour than you will ever know, and because he wouldn’t be pitied. He wouldn’t be pitied as you will be, by all, as you rot in the citadel dungeon.’

‘*Never!*’ roared Abbas. He pointed a trembling finger at Altaïr. ‘You claim you can retake the Order without loss of Assassin life. Let’s see you try. *Kill him*.’

And suddenly the men in the hall were surging forward, when …

The sound of the explosion echoed around the hall and silenced everyone – the crowds in the courtyard, the Assassins, the loyalists. All stared in shock at Altaïr, who stood with his arm held up as if pointing at Abbas – as though he had been engaging his blade in the direction of the steps. But instead of a blade at his wrist there was a curl of smoke.

From the steps came a short, strangled cry, and all watched as Abbas stared down at his chest, where a small patch of blood on his robe was gradually spreading. His eyes were wide with shock. His jaw worked as he tried to form words that wouldn’t come.

The loyalist Assassins had stopped. They stared open-mouthed at Altaïr who moved his arm, pointing at them so that now they could see the wrist mechanism he wore.

It was a single shot, and he had used it, but they didn’t know that. None had ever seen such a weapon before. Only a few even knew of its existence. And seeing it turned in their direction the loyalists cowered. They laid down their swords. They moved past Altaïr and to the door of the tower to join the crowd,

their arms held out in surrender, just as Abbas was pitching forward, tumbling down the steps and landing with a messy thud in the hall below.

Altaïr crouched over him. Abbas lay breathing heavily, one of his arms at an odd angle as though it had snapped in the fall; the front of his robe was wet with blood. He had moments left.

'You want me to ask forgiveness of you?' he asked Altaïr. He grinned, looking skeletal all of a sudden. 'For taking your wife and son?'

'Abbas, please, don't let your dying words be malicious.'

Abbas made a short scoffing sound. 'Still he tries to be virtuous.' He lifted his head a little. 'The first blow was struck by you, Altaïr. I took your wife and son, but only after your lies had taken much more from me.'

'They were not lies,' said Altaïr, simply. 'In all these years, did you never doubt?'

Abbas flinched and squeezed his eyes shut with pain. After a pause he said, 'Did you ever wonder if there is a next world, Altaïr? In moments I shall know for sure. And if there is, I shall see my father, and we will both be there to meet you when it is your time. And then – then there will be no doubt.'

He coughed and gurgled and a bubble of blood formed at his mouth. Altaïr looked into his eyes and saw nothing of the orphan boy he had once known; saw nothing of the best friend he had once had. All he saw was a twisted creature who had cost him so much.

And as Abbas died Altaïr realized that he no longer hated or pitied him. He felt nothing – nothing but relief that Abbas was no longer in the world.

Two days later the brigand Fahad appeared with seven of his men on horseback and was met at the village gates by a party of Assassins, led by Altaïr.

They pulled up at the edge of the marketplace, confronted by a line of men wearing white robes. Some stood with their arms folded, others with their hands on their bows or the hilt of their swords.

'So it is true. The great Altaïr Ibn-La'Ahad has resumed control of Masyaf,' said Fahad. He looked weary.

Altaïr bowed his head, yes.

Fahad nodded slowly, as if mulling this fact over. 'I had an understanding with your predecessor,' he said at last. 'I paid him a great deal in order that I might enter Masyaf.'

'Which you have done,' said Altaïr, pleasantly.

'Ah, yes, but for a specific reason, I'm afraid,' replied Fahad, with a cloudy smile. He shifted on his saddle a little. 'I am here to find my son's killer.'

'Which you have done,' said Altaïr, just as pleasantly.

The cloudy smile slid slowly from Fahad's face. 'I see,' he said. He leaned forward. 'Then which of you is it?' His eyes moved along the line of Assassins.

'Have you no witness to identify your son's killer?' said Altaïr. 'Can he not point out the culprit among us?'

'I did,' sighed Fahad ruefully, 'but my son's mother had his eyes put out.'

'Ah,' said Altaïr. 'Well, he was a weasel. You may console yourself that he did little to protect your son or, indeed, to avenge him once he was dead. As soon as he had two old men to face, instead of one, he turned tail and ran.'

Fahad darkened.

'You?'

Altaïr nodded. 'Your son died as he lived, Fahad. He enjoyed administering pain.'

'A trait he inherited from his mother.'

'Ah.'

'And she insists, incidentally, that his name be avenged.'

'Then there is nothing left to say,' said Altaïr. 'Unless you intend to make your attempt at this very moment, I shall expect you presently with your army.'

Fahad looked wary. 'You intend to let me leave? No archers to stop me? Knowing that I will return with a force to crush you?'

'If I killed you I would have the wrath of your wife to contend with,' smiled Altaïr, 'and, besides, I have a feeling that you will change your mind about attacking Masyaf by the time you have returned to your camp.'

'And why might that be?'

Altaïr smiled. 'Fahad, if we were to do battle then neither of us would give ground. Both of us would put more at stake than the grievance deserved. My community would be devastated, perhaps irreparably so – but so would yours.'

Fahad seemed to consider. 'It is for me to decide, surely, the price of the grievance.'

'Not long ago I lost my own son,' said Altaïr, 'and because of that I came close to losing my people. I realized it was too high a price to pay, even for my son. If you take up arms against us you risk making such a forfeit. I'm sure that the values of your community differ greatly from mine, but that they are just as prized as they are reluctantly surrendered.'

Fahad nodded. 'You have a wiser head than your predecessor, Altaïr. Much of what you say makes sense, and I shall indeed consider it on the ride back. Also I shall endeavour to explain it to my wife.' He gathered up his reins and turned his horse to go. 'Good luck, Assassin,' he said.

'It's you who will need luck by the sound of it.'

The brigand gave another of his crooked, cloudy smiles, then left. Altaïr chuckled and looked up at the citadel on the promontory.

There was much work to do.

58

12 August 1257

So. We were too late to escape Masyaf before the Mongols arrived. Indeed, they *have* arrived. As a result we leave for Constantinople in a matter of hours and I'm scribbling these words as our possessions are removed by helpers to be loaded on to the carts. And if Maffeo thinks that the sharp looks he insists on throwing my way will be enough to make me lay down my quill and lend a hand then he is mistaken. I know now that these words will be of vital importance to future Assassins. They must be written down at once.

It's a small skirmishing party, or so we're told. But the main force is not far away. In the meantime the skirmishing party seems to want to make a name for itself and has been launching small but fierce attacks, scaling the walls of the village and fighting on the ramparts before retreating. I know little of warfare, thank goodness, but it occurs to me that these short assaults may be a way of gauging our strength, or lack of it. And I wonder if the Master ever regrets his decision to weaken the citadel by disbanding the Assassins. Just two short years ago no mere skirmishing party would have come within ten paces of the castle before falling to the Assassin archers, or beneath the blades of the defenders.

When he had wrested control of the Order from Abbas, Altaïr's first task was to send for his journals: the Master's work was to be a totemic force in the rebuilding of the Order, essential for providing the foundations to stop the rot at Masyaf. Under Abbas's corrupt reign they had had none of the skills or training of old: the Brotherhood had been Assassin in name only. Altaïr's first task was to restore the discipline that had been lost: once again the training yard echoed with the ring of steel and the shouts and curses of the instructors. No Mongol would have dared a skirmish then.

But just as the Brotherhood had been restored in name and reputation, Altaïr decided that the base at Masyaf should no longer exist and removed the Assassin crest from the flagpole. His vision for the Order was that the Assassins should go out into the world, he said. They should operate among the people, not above

them. Altaïr's son Darim arrived home in Masyaf to find just a few Assassins left, most of whom were occupied in the construction of the Master's library. When it was complete, Darim was dispatched to Constantinople to locate my brother and me.

Which brings us to our entrance into the story, some eighty years after it began.

'But it is not over yet, I feel,' Maffeo said. He stood waiting for me. We were due to see the Master in the main courtyard. For what was surely the last time, we wound our way through the fortress to the courtyard, led by Altaïr's faithful steward, Mukhlis.

As we arrived I thought, What sights it has seen, this courtyard. Here was where Altaïr first saw Abbas, standing in the dead of night, pining for his stricken father. Here was where the two had fought and become enemies; where Altaïr had been shamed in front of the Order by Al Mualim; where Maria had died, Abbas, too.

None of this would have been lost on Altaïr, who had gathered most of the Assassins to hear what he had to say. Darim was among them, with his bow, the young Malik, too, and Mukhlis, who took his place beside the Master on the dais outside his tower. Nerves fluttered like moths in my stomach and I found myself taking short, jagged breaths to try to control them, finding the background noise of battle disconcerting. The Mongols, it seemed, had chosen this moment to launch another of their attacks on the castle, perhaps aware that its defences were temporarily depleted.

'Brothers,' said Altaïr, standing before us, 'our time together was brief, I know. But I have faith that this codex will answer any questions you have yet to ask.'

I took it and turned it over in my hands, in awe of it. It contained the Master's most important thoughts, distilled from decades of studying the Apple.

'Altaïr,' I said, barely able to form words, 'this gift is … invaluable. *Grazie*.'

At a sign from Altair, Mukhlis stepped forward with a small bag that he handed to the Master.

'Where will you go next?' asked Altaïr.

'To Constantinople for a time. We can establish a guild there before returning to Venice.'

He chuckled. 'Your son Marco will be eager to hear his father's wild stories.'

'He is a little young for such tales. But one day soon, *sì*.' I grinned.

He passed the bag to me and I felt several heavy objects inside it shift.

'A last favour, Niccolò. Take these with you, and guard them well. Hide them if you must.'

I raised my eyebrows, implicitly asking his permission to open the bag and he nodded. I peered inside, then reached in and removed a stone, one of five: like the others it had a hole in its centre. ‘Artefacts?’ I asked. I wondered if these were the artefacts he had found during his exile at Alamut.

‘Of a kind,’ said the Master. ‘They are keys, each one imbued with a message.’

‘A message for whom?’

‘I wish I knew,’ said Altaïr.

An Assassin came hurrying into the courtyard and spoke to Darim, who moved forward. ‘Father. A vanguard of Mongols has broken through. The village is overrun.’

Altaïr nodded. ‘Niccolò, Maffeo. My son will escort you through the worst of the fighting. Once you reach the valley, follow its course until you find a small village. Your horses and provisions are waiting for you there. Be safe, and stay alert.’

‘Likewise, Master. Take care of yourself.’

He smiled. ‘I’ll consider it.’

And with that the Master was gone, already barking orders to the Assassins. I wondered if I would ever see him again as I shouldered the bag of strange stones and held the priceless codex tight. What I remember then is an impression of bodies, of shouting, of the ringing of steel, as we were hurried to a residence, and there I huddled in a corner to scribble these words, even as the battle raged outside – but now I shall have to go. I can only pray that we will escape with our lives.

Somehow I think we will. I have faith in the Assassins. I only hope that I am worthy of Altair’s faith. In that respect, only time will tell.

1 January 1258

The first day of a new year, and it is with mixed emotions that I wipe the dust from the cover of my journal and begin a clean page, unsure whether this entry marks a fresh beginning or acts as a postscript to the tale that precedes it. Perhaps that is for you, the reader, to decide.

The first news I have to impart I deliver with a heavy heart. We have lost the codex. That which was given to us by Altaïr on the day of our departure, entrusted to our care, is in the hands of the enemy. I shall always be tortured by the moment that I lay bleeding and weeping in the sand, watching the dust kicked up by the hoofs of the Mongol attacking party, one of whom brandished the leather satchel in which I kept the codex, its strap cut. Two days out of Masyaf, with our safety assured – or so it had seemed – they had struck.

Maffeo and I escaped with our lives, though only just, and we took a little solace from the fact that our time with the Master had given us, if not the learning we might have taken from the codex, the faculties to seek out and interpret knowledge for ourselves. We resolved that soon we should go east and retrieve it (and thus, alas, delay my earliest opportunity to return to Venice and see my son Marco), but that first we should attend to business in Constantinople, for there was much to do. Ahead of us lay at least two years' work, which would be even more demanding without the wisdom of the codex to guide us. Even so, we decided that, yes, we had lost the book, but in our heads and hearts we were Assassins, and we were to put our freshly acquired experience and knowledge to good use. Thus we have already chosen the site for our trading post, a short jaunt north-west of Hagia Sophia, where we aim to supply the highest quality goods (but of course!). Meanwhile, we shall begin to spread and disseminate the creed of the Assassin, just as we pledged to do.

And at the same time as we begin the process of starting the new guild we have also set about hiding the five stones given to us by Altaïr. The keys. Guard them well, he had said, or hide them. After our experiences with the Mongols we had decided that the keys should be hidden so we set about secreting them around and about Constantinople. We are due to hide the last one today, so by the time you read this, all five keys will be safely hidden from the Templars, for an Assassin of the future to find.

Whoever that may be.

Epilogue

From above him on deck the Assassin heard the sounds of a commotion, the familiar drumming of feet that accompanies the approach to land, crew members rushing from their posts to the prow, shimmying up the rigging or hanging off ropes, shielding their eyes to stare long and hard at the shimmering harbours towards which they were sailing, anticipating adventures ahead.

The Assassin, too, had adventures ahead of him. Of course, his would likely be markedly different from the escapades fondly imagined by the crew, which no doubt consisted primarily of visiting taverns and consorting with whores. The Assassin almost envied them the simplicity of their endeavours. His tasks would be more complicated.

He closed Niccolò's journals and pushed the book away from him on the desk, his fingers running across the ageing cover, mulling over what he had just learned, the full significance of which, he knew, would take time to make itself known. And then, with a deep breath, he stood, pulled on his robe, secured the mechanism of the blade to his wrist and pulled up his cowl. Next, he opened the hatch of his quarters to appear on deck where he, too, shielded his eyes to cast his gaze upon the harbour as the ship sliced through the sparkling water towards it, people gathered there already to welcome them.

Ezio had arrived in the great city. He was in Constantinople.

List of Characters

Niccolò Polo, the narrator
Maffeo Polo

The Assassins
Altaïr Ibn-La’Ahad
Maria, his wife (née Thorpe)
Darim and Sef, their sons
Al Mualim, the Master
Faheem al-Sayf
Umar Ibn-La’Ahad, Altaïr’s father
Abbas Sofian
Ahmad Sofian, Abbas’s father
Malik Al-Sayf
Tazim, Malik’s son, also known as Malik
Kadar, Malik’s brother
Rauf
Jabal
Labib
Swami
Farim

Masyaf villagers
Mukhlis, his wife, Aalia, and daughter, Nada

The Crusades
Richard I of England, ‘the Lionheart’
Salah Al’din, Sultan of the Saracens
Shihab Al’din, his son

Altaïr's Nine Targets
Tamir, black-market merchant
Abu'l Nuqoud, the Merchant King of Damascus
Garnier de Naplouse, the Grand Master, the Knights Hospitalier
Talal, a slave trader
Majd Addin, regent of Jerusalem
William de Montferrat, lord of Acre
Sibrand, Grand Master, the Knights Teutonic
Jubair al-Hakim, chief scholar of Damascus
Robert de Sable, Grand Master, the Knights Templar

In Cyprus
Osman, Limassol citadel captain
Frederick the Red, ranking Templar knight of Limassol
Armand Bouchart, Robert de Sable's successor
Markos, Resistance
Barnabas, Resistance
Barnabas, imposter
Jonas, a merchant
Moloch, 'The Bull'
Shalim and Shahar, sons of Moloch

The Bandits
Fahad
Bayhas
Long Hair

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Christele Jalady
The Ubisoft Legal Department
Charlie Patterson
Chris Marcus
Etienne Allonier
Maria Loreto
Alex Clarke
Alice Shepherd
Andrew Holmes
Clémence Deleuze
Guillaume Carmona

Oliver Bowden

ASSASSIN'S CREED®

Revelations

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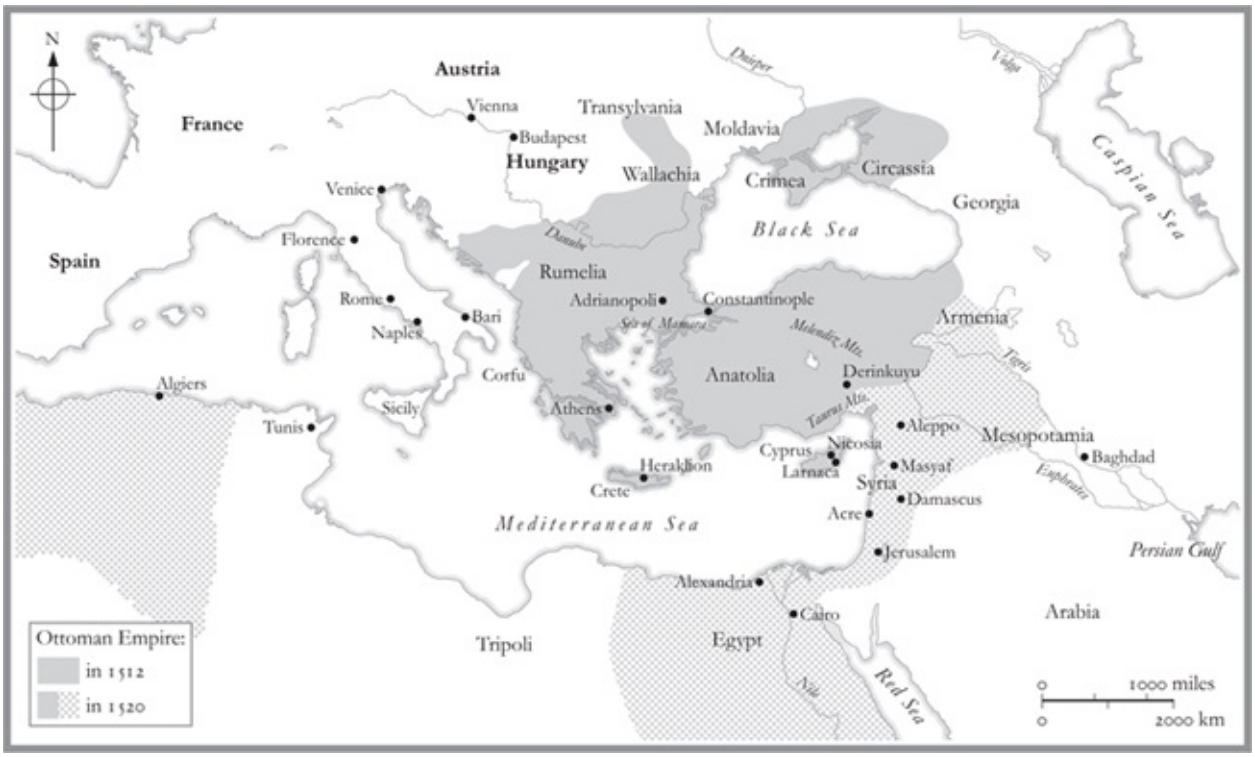

Part One

When I had travelled half the road of life
I found myself in the midst of a dark forest:
I'd lost my way, strayed from the true path.
It's difficult to say what that grim wood was like –
Even now, my senses reel at the memory –

– Dante, *Inferno*

1

An eagle soared, high in the hard, clear sky.

The traveller, dusty, battered from the road, drew his eyes from it, pulled himself up and over a low, rough wall, and stood motionless for a moment, scanning the scene with keen eyes. The rugged snow-capped mountains fenced in the castle, protecting it and enclosing it as it reared on the crest of its own height, the domed tower of its keep mirroring the lesser dome of the prison tower nearby. Iron rocks like claws clung to the bases of its sheer grey walls. Not the first time he'd seen it – a day earlier he'd caught his first glimpse, at dusk, from a promontory he'd climbed a mile west. Built as if by sorcery in this impossible terrain, at one with the rocks and crags it joined forces with.

He'd arrived at his goal – at last. After twelve weary months on the journey. And such a long journey – the ways deep and the weather sharp.

Crouching now, just in case, and keeping still as he instinctively checked his weapons, the traveller kept watching. Any sign of movement. Any.

Not a soul on the battlements. Scuds of snow twisting in a cutting wind. But no sign of a man. The place seemed deserted. As he'd expected from what he'd read of it. But life had taught him that it was always best to make sure. He stayed still.

Not a sound but the wind. Then – something. A scraping? To his left ahead of him a handful of pebbles skeetered down a bare incline. He tensed, rose slightly, head up between ducked shoulders. Then the arrow whacked into his right shoulder, through the body armour there.

He staggered a little, grimacing in pain as his hand went to the arrow, raising his head, looking hard at the skein of a rise in the rocks – a small precipice, maybe twenty feet high – which rose before the front of the castle and served as a natural outer bailey. On its ridge there now appeared a man in a dull red tunic with grey outer garments and armour. He bore the insignia of a captain. His bare head was close-shaven and a scar seared his face, across from right down to left. He opened his mouth in an expression that was part snarl, part smile of triumph, showing stunted and uneven teeth, brown like the tombstones in an unkempt graveyard.

The traveller pulled at the arrow's shaft. Though the barbed head snagged on the armour, it had only penetrated the metal and the point had scarcely penetrated his flesh. He snapped it off the shaft and threw it aside. As he did so he saw a hundred and more armed men, similarly dressed, halberds and swords ready, line up along the crest on either side of the shaven-headed captain. Helmets with nose-guards hid their faces, but the black eagle crests on their tunics told the traveller who they were, and he knew what he could expect from them if they took him.

Was he getting old, to have fallen into a trap this simple? But he'd taken every precaution.

And it hadn't succeeded yet.

He stepped back, ready for them as they poured down to the rugged platform of ground he stood on, fanning out to surround him, keeping the length of their halberds between themselves and their prey. He could sense that despite their numbers they feared him. His reputation was known, and they were right to be wary.

He gauged the halberd heads. Double type: axe and pike.

He flexed his arms and from his wrists his two lean, grey, deadly hidden blades sprang. Bracing himself, he deflected the first blow, sensing that it had been hesitant – did they want to try to take him alive? Then they starting digging at him from all sides with their weapons, trying to bring him to his knees.

He whirled, and with two clean movements sliced through the hafts of the nearest halberds. As the head of one flew through the air, he retracted one of the hidden blades and seized the broken halberd head before it could fall to earth. Taking the stump of its haft in his fist he buried the axe-blade in the chest of its former owner.

They closed on him then, and he was just in time to stoop low as a rush of air signalled the passing of a swung halberd as it sickled over him, missing his bent back by an inch. He swung round savagely and released, then with his left hidden blade hacked deep into the legs of the attacker who'd stood before him. With a howl, the man went down.

The traveller seized the fallen halberd, which a moment earlier had almost ended him, and swivelled it round in the air, slicing the hands off another of his assailants. The hands arched through the air, the fingers curled as if beseeching mercy, a plume of blood like a red rainbow curve trailing behind them.

That stopped them for a moment, but these men had seen worse sights than that, and the traveller had only a second's respite before they were closing again. He swung the halberd and left its blade deep in the neck of a man who, an instant before, had been moving in to bring him down. The traveller let go of its haft

and retracted his other hidden blade in order to free his hands to seize a sergeant wielding a broadsword, whom he threw bodily into a knot of his troops, wresting the sword from him. He hefted its weight, feeling his biceps tense as he took a double grip and raised it just in time to cleave the helmet of another halberdier, this time coming from his rear left quarter, hoping to blindside him.

The sword was good. Better for this job than the light scimitar at his side, acquired on his journey, or the hidden blades for close work. They had never let him down.

More men were streaming down from the castle now. How many would it take to overpower this lone man? They crowded him, but he whirled and jumped to confuse them, seeking freedom from their press by hurling himself over the back of one man, finding his feet, bracing himself, deflecting a sword's blow with the hard metal bracer on his left wrist and turning to drive his own sword into this attacker's side.

But then – a momentarily lull. Why? The traveller paused, getting his breath. There was a time when he would not have needed to get his breath. He looked up. Still fenced in by the troops in grey chainmail.

But among them, the traveller suddenly saw another man.

Another man. Walking between them. Unobserved, calm. A young man in white. Clad as the traveller was, otherwise, and wearing the same cowl over his head, the hood peaked, as his was, to a sharp point at the front, like an eagle's beak. The traveller's lips parted in wonder. All seemed silent. All seemed at rest, except for the young man in white, walking. Steadily, calmly, undismayed.

The young man seemed to walk amongst the fighting like a man would walk through a field of corn – as if it did not touch or affect him at all. Was that the same buckle fastening his gear, the same as the one the traveller wore? With the same insignia? The insignia which had been branded on the traveller's consciousness and his life for over thirty years – just as surely as, long ago, his ring finger had been branded?

The traveller blinked, and when he opened his eyes the vision – if that was what it had been – had disappeared, and the noise, the smells, the danger, were back, all around him, closing on him, rank upon rank of an enemy he knew he could not overcome or escape from.

But somehow now he did not feel so alone.

No time to think. They were closing in hard now, as scared as they were angry. Blows rained, too many to fend off. The traveller fought hard, took down five more, ten. But he was fighting a hydra with a thousand heads. A big swordsman came up and brought a twenty-pound blade down on him. He raised his left arm to fend it off with the bracer, turning and dropping his own heavy

sword as he did so to bring his hidden blades back into play. But his attacker was lucky. The momentum of his blow was deflected by the bracer but it was still too powerful to glance off completely. It slid towards the traveller's left wrist and made contact with the left-hand hidden blade, snapping it off. At the same moment the traveller, caught off balance, stumbled on a loose rock at his feet and turned his ankle. He could not stop himself from falling face down onto the stony ground. And there he lay.

Above him, the circle of men closed in, keeping the length of their halberds between themselves and their quarry, still tense, still scared, not yet daring to be triumphant. But the points of their pikes made contact with his back. One move and he'd be dead.

And he was not ready for that, yet.

The crunch of boots on rock. A man approaching. The traveller turned his head slightly to see the shaven-headed captain standing over him. The scar was livid across his face. He bent close enough for the traveller to smell his breath.

The captain drew the traveller's hood back just enough to see his face. He smiled as his expectation was confirmed.

'Ah, the Mentor has arrived. Ezio Auditore da Firenze. We've been expecting you – as you have no doubt realized. Must be quite a shock to you, to see your Brotherhood's old stronghold in our hands. But it was bound to happen. For all your efforts, we were bound to prevail.'

He stood erect, turned to the troops encircling Ezio, two hundred strong, and snapped out an order. 'Take him to the turret cell. Manacle him first, and strongly.'

They pulled Ezio to his feet and hastily, nervously, bound him fast.

'Just a short walk and a lot of stairs,' the captain said. 'And then you'd better pray. We'll hang you in the morning.'

High above them, the eagle continued its search for prey. No one had an eye for it. For its beauty. Its freedom.

2

The eagle still wheeled in the sky. A pale blue sky, bleached by the sun, though the sun was a little lower now. The bird of prey, a dark silhouette, turning and turning, but now with purpose. Its shadow fell on the bare rocks far below, torn jagged by them as it passed over.

Ezio watched through the narrow window – no more than a gash in the thick stone – and his eyes were as restless as the movements of the bird. His thoughts were restless too. Had he travelled so far and for so long, only for it all to come to this?

He clenched his fists, and his muscles felt the absence of the hidden blades, which had for so long now stood him in such good stead.

But he had an idea of where they'd stowed his weapons, after they'd ambushed and overpowered him, and brought him here. A grim smile formed on his lips. Those troops, the old enemy – how surprised they'd been that such an old lion could still have so much fight in him.

And he knew this castle. From charts and diagrams. He had studied them so well that they were printed on his mind.

But here he was, in a cell in one of the topmost towers of the great fortress of Masyaf, the citadel which had once been the stronghold of the Assassins, long since abandoned, and now fallen to the Templars. Here he was – alone, unarmed, hungry and thirsty, his clothes grimy and torn, awaiting every moment the footfall of his executioners. But not about to go quietly. He knew why the Templars were here; he had to stop them.

And they hadn't killed him yet.

He kept his eyes on the eagle. He could see every feather, every pinion, the fanned rudder of the tail, speckled black-brown and white, like his own beard. The pure white wingtips.

He thought back. He traced the route that had brought him here – to this.

Other towers, other battlements. Like the ones at Viana, from which he had flung Cesare Borgia to his doom. That had been in the Year of Our Lord, 1507. How long ago was that? Four years. It might as well have been four centuries, it seemed so distant, now. And in the meantime other villains, other would-be

masters of the world, had come and gone, in search of the Mystery, in search of the Power, and for him, a prisoner at last, the battle to counter them had continued.

The battle. His whole life.

The eagle wheeled and turned, its movements concentrated now. Ezio watched it, knowing that it had located prey and was focusing on it. What life could there be down there? But the village which supported the castle, crouched low and unhappy in its shadow, would have livestock and even a scrap of cultivated land somewhere nearby. A goat, maybe, down there among the tumble of grey rocks which littered the low surrounding hills; either a young one, too inexperienced, or an old one, too tired, or one that had been injured. The eagle flew against the sun, its silhouette momentarily blotted out by the incandescent light; and then, tightening its circle, it hung, poised, at last, hanging there in the vast blue arena, before it swooped down, crashing through the air like a thunderbolt, and out of sight.

Ezio turned away from the window and looked around the cell. A bed, hard dark wood, just planks on it, no bedding, a stool and a table. No crucifix on the wall, and nothing else except the plain pewter bowl and spoon which contained the still-untasted gruel they'd given him. That, and a wooden beaker of water, also untasted. For all his thirst and hunger, Ezio feared drugs that might weaken him, render him powerless when the moment came. And it was all too possible that the Templars would have drugged the food and drink they gave him.

He turned around in the narrow cell but the rough stone walls gave him neither comfort nor hope. There was nothing here he could use to escape. He sighed. There were other Assassins, others in the Brotherhood who knew of his mission, who had wanted to accompany him, despite his insistence that he travel alone. Perhaps, when no news came, they would take up the challenge. But then, perhaps, it would be too late.

The question was, how much did the Templars already know? How much of the secret did they already have in their possession?

His quest, which had now come to such an abrupt halt at the moment of its fruition, had begun soon after his return to Rome, where he had bid farewell to his companions, Leonardo da Vinci and Niccolò Machiavelli, on his forty-eighth birthday, Midsummer's Day, four years earlier. Niccolò was to return to Florence, Leonardo to Milan. Leonardo had spoken of taking up a pressing offer of much-needed patronage from Francis, heir apparent to the throne of France, and a residence in Amboise, on the River Loire. At least, that's what his letters had revealed to Ezio.

Ezio smiled at the memory of his friend. Leonardo, whose mind was ever teeming with new ideas, though it always took him a while to get round to them. He thought ruefully of the hidden blade, which had been shattered in the fight when they'd ambushed him. Leonardo – how he missed him! – the one man he could have really trusted to mend it. But at least Leonardo had sent him the plans he'd made for a new device, which he called a parachute. Ezio had had it constructed back in Rome and it was packed with his kit, and he doubted if the Templars would make much sense of it. He would put it to good use as soon as he got a chance.

If he got a chance.

He steeled himself against dark thoughts.

But there was nothing to do, no means of escape, until they came to get him, to hang him. He would have to plan what to do then. He imagined that, as so often in the past, he would have to extemporize. In the meantime, he'd try to rest his body. He'd made sure he was still fit by training before this journey, and the journey itself had hardened him. But he was glad – even in these circumstances – of the chance to rest after that fight.

It had all started with a letter.

Under the benevolent eye of Pope Julius II, who had aided him in his vanquishing of the Borgia family, Ezio had rebuilt and restructured the Assassins' Brotherhood in Rome, and established his power base there.

For a while at least now, the Templars were in abeyance, and Ezio left the running of operations in the capable hands of his sister Claudia; but the Assassins remained vigilant. They knew that the Templars would regroup, secretly, elsewhere, insatiable in their quest for the instruments by which they could at last control the world, in accordance with their sombre tenets.

They were bested for the moment, but the beast was not dead.

Ezio drew comfort and satisfaction from the fact – and he shared this dark knowledge with Machiavelli and Leonardo alone – that the Apple of Eden which had fallen into his care, and which had caused so much anguish and death in the battle for its possession, was buried and hidden deep in the vaults below the Church of San Nicola in Carcere, in a secret sealed room whose location they had marked only with the sacred symbols of the Brotherhood – which only a future Assassin would be able to discern, let alone decipher. The greatest Piece of Eden was safely concealed from the ambitious grasp of the Templars – as Ezio hoped, forever.

After the damage wrought to the Brotherhood by the Borgias, there had been much to retrieve, much to put in order, and to this task Ezio had devoted himself,

uncomplainingly, although he was far more inclined to open air and action than to poring over papers in dusty archives. That was a job more suited to his late father's secretary, Giulio, or to the bookish Machiavelli; but Machiavelli was busy commanding the Florentine militia these days, and Giulio was long dead.

Still, Ezio reflected, if he hadn't saddled himself with the responsibility for what was to him a dreary task, he might never have found the letter. And if another had, that person might not have guessed its significance.

The letter, which he'd found in a leather satchel, brittle with age, was from Ezio's father Giovanni to his brother Mario, the man who'd taught Ezio the art of war and initiated him into the Brotherhood three long decades earlier. Mario. Ezio flinched at the memory. Mario, who had died at the cruel and cowardly hands of Cesare Borgia in the wake of the battle of Monteriggione.

Mario had long since been avenged, but the letter Ezio found opened a new chapter, and its contents proffered him the chance of a new mission. It was 1509 when he'd found it, and he'd just turned fifty; he knew the chance of new missions seldom came to men of his age. Besides, the letter offered him the hope and the challenge of closing the gates of opportunity on the Templars forever.

Palazzo Auditore
Firenze
iv febbraio MCDLVIII

Dear Brother

The forces against us are gathering strength and there is a man in Rome who has taken command of our enemies who is perhaps the greatest power you and I will ever have to reckon with. For this reason I impart to you, under the seal of utmost secrecy, the following information. If fate should overtake me, ensure – with your life, if necessary – that this information never falls into our enemies' hands.

There is, as you know, a castle called Masyaf in Syria which was once the seat of our Brotherhood. There, over two centuries ago, our then Mentor, Altaïr ibn-La'Ahad, greatest of our Order, established a library deep beneath the fortress.

I say no more now. Discretion dictates that what else I have to tell you of this must be in conversation and never written down.

This is a quest I would have longed to accomplish myself, but there is no time now. Our enemies press upon us and we have no time except to fight back.

Your Brother
Giovanni Auditore

With this letter was another sheet of paper – a tantalizing fragment, clearly in his father's handwriting, but equally clearly not by him – a translation of a much older document, also with it, written on parchment which accorded very closely with that on which the original Codex pages, uncovered by Ezio and his companions nearly thirty years earlier, had been written:

I have spent days with the artefact now. Or has it been weeks? Months? The others come from time to time, offering food or distraction; and though I know in my heart I should separate

myself from these dark studies, I find it more and more difficult to assume my normal duties. Malik has been supportive, but even now that old edge returns to his voice. Still, my work must continue. This Apple of Eden must be understood. Its function is simple. Elementary, even: Dominion. Control. But the process … the methods and means it employs … THESE are fascinating. It is temptation incarnate. Those subjected to its glow are promised all that they desire. It asks only one thing in return: complete and total obedience. And who can truly refuse? I remember my own moment of weakness when confronted by Al Mualim, my Mentor, and my confidence was shaken by his words. He, who had been like a father, was now revealed to be my greatest enemy. Just the briefest flicker of doubt was all he needed to creep into my mind. But I vanquished his phantoms – restored my self-confidence – and sent him from this world. I freed myself from his control. But now I wonder, is this true? For here I sit – desperate to understand that which I intended to destroy. I sense it is more than just a weapon, a tool for manipulating men's minds. Or is it? Perhaps it's simply following its design: showing me what I desire most. Knowledge … Always hovering at the edge. Just out of reach. Beckoning. Promising. Tempting …

The old manuscript tailed off there, the rest lost, and indeed the parchment was so brittle with age that its edges crumbled as he touched it.

Ezio understood little of it, but some of it was so familiar that his skin prickled, even in his scalp, at the memory. It did again now as Ezio recalled it, sitting in his cell in the prison tower at Masyaf, watching the sun set on what might be his last day on earth.

He visualized the old manuscript. It was this, more than anything, that had determined him to travel east, to Masyaf.

Darkness fell quickly. The sky was cobalt blue. Stars already speckled it.

For no reason Ezio's thoughts turned to the young man in white. The man he'd seemed to see in the lull in the fighting. Who had appeared and disappeared so mysteriously, like a vision, but who had, somehow, been *real*, and who had, somehow, *communicated* with him.

3

Preparations for his journey had taken Ezio the rest of that year, and spilled into the next. He rode north to Florence and conferred with Machiavelli, though he did not tell him all that he knew. In Ostia he visited Bartolomeo d'Alviano, who had filled out with too much good food and wine, but who was as ferocious as ever, though he was a family man now. He and Pantasilea had produced three sons and, a month ago, a daughter. What had he said?

'Time you got a move on, Ezio! None of us is getting any younger.'

Ezio had smiled. Barto was luckier than he knew.

Ezio regretted that there was no time to extend his journey further north to Milan, but he had kept his weaponry in good order – the blades, the pistol, the bracer – and there was no time, either, to tempt Leonardo into finding yet more ways of improving them. Indeed, Leonardo himself had said, after he'd last overhauled them, a year earlier, that they were now beyond improvement.

That remained to be seen, when they were next put to the test.

Machiavelli had given him other news in Florence, a city he still set foot in only with sadness, so heaped was it with memories of his lost family and his devastated inheritance. His lost love, too – the first and, he thought, perhaps the only true one of his life – Cristina Calfucci. Twelve years – could it really be so long since she had died at the hands of Savonarola's fanatics? And now another death. Machiavelli had told him about it, hesitantly. The faithless Caterina Sforza, who had blighted Ezio's life as much as Cristina had blessed it, had just died, a wasted old woman of forty-six, forgotten and poor, her vitality and confidence long since extinguished.

As he went through life, Ezio began to think that the best company he'd ever truly have would be his own.

But he had no time to grieve or brood. The months flew by, and soon it was Christmas, and so much still to do.

At last, early in the New Year, on the feast of St Hilary, he was ready, and a day was set for his departure from Rome, via Naples, to the southern port of Bari, with an escort organized by Bartolomeo, who'd ride with him.

At Bari he would take ship.

4

‘God go with you, brother,’ Claudia told him on his last morning in Rome. They had risen before dawn. Ezio would leave at first light.

‘You must take care of things here in my absence.’

‘Do you doubt me?’

‘Not any more. Have you still not forgiven me for that?’

Claudia smiled. ‘There is a great beast in Africa called the elephant. They say it never forgets. It is the same with women. But don’t worry, Ezio. I will take care of things until you return.’

‘Or until we have need of a new Mentor.’

Claudia didn’t reply to that. Her face became troubled. She said: ‘This mission. Why do you go alone? Why have you said so little of its import?’

‘ “He travels fastest who travels alone”,’ Ezio quoted by way of reply. ‘As for details, I have left our father’s papers in your keeping. Open them if I do not return. And I have told you all you need to know of Masyaf.’

‘Giovanni was my father too.’

‘But he entrusted this responsibility to me.’

‘You have assumed it, brother.’

‘I am Mentor,’ he said, simply. ‘It is my responsibility.’

She looked at him. ‘Well, travel safely. Write.’

‘I will. In any case you won’t have to worry about me between here and Bari. Barto will be with me all the way.’

She still looked worried. Ezio was touched that the tough woman his sister had grown up to be still had a tender spot in her heart for him. His overland journey would lead him through Italy’s southern territories, and they were controlled by the Crown of Aragon. But King Ferdinand hadn’t forgotten his debt to Ezio.

‘If I’m after action,’ he told her, reading her thoughts, ‘I won’t get any until I set sail. And my course leads pretty far to the north for me to have to worry about Barbary corsairs. We’ll hug the Greek coast after Corfu.’

‘I’m more worried about you completing what you’re setting out to do. Not because I’m worried about you personally –’

‘Oh really? Thank you for that.’

She grinned. ‘You know what I mean. From all you’ve said, and Santa Veronica may hold witness that you’ve told me little enough, a good outcome is important for us.’

‘That’s why I’m going now. Before the Templars can regain strength.’

‘Seize the initiative?’

‘That’s about it.’

She took his face in her hands. He looked at her one last time. At forty-nine, she was still a strikingly beautiful woman, her dark hair still dark, and her fiery nature unquenched. Sometimes he regretted that she had not found another man after the death of her husband, but she was devoted to her children and her work, and made no secret of the fact that she loved living in Rome, which, under Pope Julius, had once again become a sophisticated international city, and an artistic and religious mecca.

They embraced, and Ezio mounted his horse, at the head of the short cavalcade which was accompanying him – fifteen armed riders under Barto, who was already mounted, his heavy horse pawing the dust, impatient to be gone, and a wagon to carry their supplies. For himself, all Ezio needed was in two black leather saddlebags. ‘I’ll forage as I go along,’ he told Claudia.

‘You’re good at that,’ she replied, with a wry grin.

Raising his hand as he settled into the saddle, Ezio wheeled his horse and, as Barto brought his own steed alongside, they made their way down the east side of the river, away from the Assassins’ Headquarters on Tiber Island, towards the city gates and the long road south.

It took them fifteen days to reach Bari, and once there, Ezio bade leave of his old friend hastily, in order not to miss the first available flood tide. He took a ship belonging to the Turkish merchant fleet managed by Piri Reis and his family. Once installed in the after cabin of the large lateen-sailed dhow, the *Anaan* – a freighter on which he was the only passenger – Ezio took the opportunity to check – once again – the essential gear he took with him. Two hidden blades, one for each wrist, his bracer for the left forearm, to deflect the blows of swords, and the spring-loaded pistol which Leonardo had made for him, along with all his other special armaments, from ancient designs found in the pages of the Codex of the Assassins.

Ezio was travelling light. In truth he expected to find Masyaf, if he succeeded in reaching it, deserted. At the same time, he admitted to himself that he was uneasy at the scarcity of Assassin intelligence about Templar movements in these present days of apparent, or, at least, relative peace.

As far as this second leg of the journey, which would take him to Corfu, was concerned, he knew he had little to fear. Piri Reis was a great captain among the Ottomans, and had once been a pirate himself, so his men would know how to handle them, if fear of Piri's name alone didn't keep them at bay. Ezio wondered if he'd meet the great man himself one day. If he did, he hoped Piri, not known for his easy-going nature, would have forgotten the time when the Brotherhood had been constrained to 'liberate' some of Piri's precious maps from him.

The Ottomans themselves now held sway over Greece and much of eastern Europe – indeed, their territories almost touched those of Venice in the west. Not everyone was happy with the situation, or with the presence of so many Turks in Europe; but Venice, after a stand-off, had continued to trade with its Muslim neighbours, and la Serenissima had kept control of Corfu, Crete and Cyprus. Ezio couldn't see the situation lasting – the Ottomans had already made unfriendly advances on Cyprus – but for the moment peace held, and Sultan Bayezid was too preoccupied with internal family squabbles to make any trouble in the west.

The broad-beamed ship with her great sail of white canvas cut through the water more like a broadsword than a knife, but they made good time despite adverse headwinds, and the short voyage across the mouth of the Adriatic took little more than five days.

After a welcome from the governor of Corfu, a fat Italian called Franco who liked to be called Spiridon, after the local patron saint, and who had clearly long since abandoned politics for lotus-eating, Ezio had a talk with the ship's captain as they stood on a balcony fronting the governor's villa, and looking out over palm trees to the harbour, which nestled under a sky of blue velvet. In exchange for another pouch of Venetian *soldi*, they agreed between them that Ezio should continue on to Athens.

'That's our destination,' the captain told him. 'We'll be hugging the coast, I've done the trip twenty times, there will be no problem, no danger. And from there it will be easy to take a vessel bound for Crete and even on to Cyprus. In fact, I'll introduce you to my brother-in-law Ma'Mun when we reach Athens. He's a shipping agent. He'll take care of you.'

'I'm obliged,' Ezio said. He hoped the man's confidence was well-placed. The *Anaan* was taking on an important cargo of spices for transfer to Athens and Ezio remembered enough from his early days when his father was one of the major bankers of Florence to know that this cargo would make the *Anaan* a tempting target for any pirate, no matter how great a fear the name of Piri Reis might strike in them. If you fight on a ship you need to be able to move fast and lightly.

In the town, the following morning, he went to an armourer and bought a well-tempered scimitar, beating the man down to 100 *soldi*.

‘Insurance,’ Ezio told himself.

The following day at dawn the tide was high enough for them to begin their voyage, and they took advantage of it and the brisk northerly wind, which filled their sail immediately. They coasted south, keeping the shore about a mile to their port side. The sun sparkled on the steel-blue waves and the warm wind caressed their hair. Only Ezio could not quite bring himself to relax.

They’d reached a point just south of the island of Zante when it happened. They had pulled out further to sea to take full advantage of the wind, and the water had turned darker and choppier. The sun was dipping towards the western horizon and you couldn’t look in that direction and see anything without squinting. The mariners were casting a log over the starboard side to take the speed, and Ezio watched them.

Afterwards he couldn’t have said what it was that had caught his attention. A sea bird, perhaps, dipping along the side of the ship, attracted his eye. But it was no bird. It was sail. Two sails. Two sea-going galleys, coming in out of the sun, taking them by surprise and upon them. The corsairs had laid alongside almost before the captain had time to summon his crew to arms and action stations. The pirates threw grappling irons on ropes over the *Anaan*’s side and were soon scrambling aboard, as Ezio raced aft to arm himself. Luckily, he had the scimitar already at his side, and was able to put it to its first test, slicing his way through five Berber seamen as he struggled to reach his goal.

He was breathing heavily as he hastily strapped on his bracer and picked up his gun. He had enough faith in the scimitar by now to dispense with his hidden blades, which he stowed quickly in a hiding place in the cabin. He judged the bracer and the gun the better weapons for this combat.

He sprang into the fray – around him was the familiar clashing of weapons and already the smell of blood. A fire had started forward, and the wind, which had chosen that moment to turn, now threatened to drag it aft the length of the ship. Commanding two Ottoman sailors to grab buckets, he ordered them to the ship’s water reservoir. At that moment, a pirate flung himself from the rigging onto Ezio’s shoulders. One of the sailors yelled out a warning. Ezio spun round, flexed the muscles of his right wrist, and his gun sprang from the mechanism strapped to his forearm, into his hand. Swiftly, with no time to aim, he fired, stepping back immediately to allow the still falling body to crash past him onto the deck.

‘Fill quickly, and put out the flames before they spread,’ he yelled. ‘The ship will be lost if the fire takes hold.’

He hacked away at three or four Berbers who had raced towards him, sensing already that he was the one man aboard to neutralize if their attack was to be successful. He then found himself confronted with the corsair captain, a burly brute with an English cutlass in each hand – booty, no doubt, from some earlier unfortunate victims.

'Yield, Venetian dog!' the man snarled.

'Your first mistake,' replied Ezio. 'Never insult a Florentine by mistaking him for a Venetian.'

The captain's reply was to bring a savage left-armed blow ringing down towards Ezio's head, but Ezio was ready for it and raised his own left arm, letting the cutlass blade slide harmlessly down the length of the bracer and off into the air. The captain hadn't expected this and was thrown off balance. Ezio tripped him and flung him headlong into the reservoir in the hold below.'

'Help, *Effendi*! I cannot swim!' the captain burbled as he surfaced.

'Then you had better learn,' Ezio told him, turning away to cut at two more pirates who were almost upon him. Out of the corner of his eye he could see that his own two sailors had succeeded in lowering their buckets on ropes into the reservoir and that now, joined by a handful more of their shipmates, similarly equipped, they were beginning to get the fire under control.

But the most ferocious fighting had moved to the rear of the ship, and there the Ottomans were getting the worst of it. Ezio realized that the Berbers had no desire for the *Anaan* to burn, for that way they'd lose their prize; so they were letting Ezio's sailors get on with the job of dousing the fire, while they concentrated on taking the ship.

His mind moved fast. They were badly outnumbered, and he knew that the *Anaan*'s crew, tough men as they were, were not trained fighters. He turned to a stack of unlit torches stowed under a hatchway in the bow. Leaping over, and seizing one, he thrust it into the dying flames of the fire, and once it had taken, he threw it with all his force into the further of the two Berber ships lying alongside. Then he seized another and repeated the action. By the time the Berbers aboard the *Anaan* realized what was going on, each of their ships was well ablaze.

It was a calculated risk, but it paid off. Instead of fighting for control of their prey, and realizing that their captain was nowhere to be seen, the pirates panicked, and beat a way back to the gunwale, as the Ottomans, taking heart, renewed their own efforts and launched a counter-attack, lashing out with sticks, swords, hatchets, belaying-pins and whatever else came to hand.

In another fifteen minutes they had driven the Berbers back to their own ships and cast off, cutting the grappling irons free with axes, and using poles to push

the burning galleys away. The Ottoman captain barked a number of rapid orders, and soon the *Anaan* was clear. Once order had been re-established, the crew set about swabbing the decks of blood and stacking the bodies of the dead. Ezio knew that it was against their religion to cast a body overboard. He just hoped the rest of the journey wouldn't take long.

The Berber captain, a soggy mess, was hauled from the reservoir. He stood on the deck, abject and dripping.

'You'd better disinfect that water,' Ezio said to the *Anaan*'s captain, as the pirate chief was led away in irons.

'We have enough drinking water for our needs in barrels – they will take us as far as Athens,' the captain replied. Then he drew a small leather purse from the pouch at his side. 'This is for you,' he said.

'What is it?'

'I'm refunding your fare,' said the captain. 'It's the least I can do. And when we reach Athens I'll see to it that your feat is spoken of. As for your onward journey, rest assured that everything will be arranged for you.'

'We shouldn't have relaxed,' said Ezio.

The captain looked at him. 'You are right. Perhaps one should never relax.'

'You are right,' Ezio replied, sadly.

5

Athens prospered under the Turks, though as he walked the streets and visited the monuments and temples of the Greek Golden Age, now being rediscovered and revered in his own country, and saw with his own eyes the statues and buildings which were inspiring his friends Michelangelo and Bramante in Rome, Ezio understood something of the proud resentment which gleamed unmistakably in the eyes of several men and women of the local population. But he was fêted by Ma'Mun, the Ottoman captain's brother-in-law, and his family, who showered him with gifts and urged him to stay.

His stay was longer than he had wanted it to be in any case, since unseasonable storms had boiled up in the Aegean north of Serifos, battering the cluster of islands to the south of Athens and effectively closing the port of Piraeus for a month or more. Never had such tempests been seen at this time of year. Street prophets inevitably muttered about the end of the world, a topic much discussed at the time of the half millennium in 1500. In the meantime, Ezio, having no interest in such things and only chafing against the delay, brooded over the maps and notes he had brought with him, and vainly tried to glean intelligence on the Templars' movements in the area, and in the region south and east of Greece.

At one celebration in his honour he made the acquaintance of a Dalmatian princess and had a dalliance with her, but it was no more than that, a dalliance, and his heart remained as isolated as it had been for so long. He had ceased, he told himself, to look for love. A home of his own, a real home, and a family – these held no place in the life of an Assassin Mentor. Ezio had read something, dimly understood, of the life of his remote forebear in the Brotherhood, Altaïr ibn-La'Ahad. He had paid dearly for having a family. And even though Ezio's own father had managed it, he too had paid a bitter price in the end.

But at last – not too soon for the impatient Ezio – the winds and the seas abated and were replaced with the fine weather of spring. Ma'Mun had made all the arrangements for his onward passage to Crete, and the same ship would take him further – as far as Cyprus. This vessel was a warship, a four-masted *kogge*, the *Qutaybah*, with one of its lower decks armed with a line of ten cannon on

each side, and more guns in emplacements in the hull fore and aft. In addition to lateen sails, she was square-rigged, European style, on the main and mizzen masts; and there was an oar-deck below the cannon, thirty oars to a side.

Chained to one of them was the Berber captain Ezio had tangled with on the *Anaan*.

'You will be free from the need to defend yourself on this ship, *effendi*,' Ma'Mun told Ezio.

'I admire it. It has something of the European design about it.'

'Our Sultan Bayezid admires much that is gracious and useful in your culture,' replied Ma'Mun. 'We can learn a great deal from each other, if we try.'

Ezio nodded.

'The *Qutaybah* carries our Athens envoy to a conference at Nicosia, and will dock at Larnaca in twenty days. The captain only stops at Heraklion to take on water and supplies.' He paused. 'And I have something for you …'

They were seated, drinking *sharbat*, in Ma'Mun's office in the port. The Turk now turned to a huge iron-bound chest which stood against the far wall, taking from it a map. 'This is precious, as all maps are, but it is a special gift from me to you. It is a map of Cyprus drawn up by Piri Reis himself. You will have time there.' He held up his hands as Ezio began to object, as politely as he could. The further east you travelled, the less urgency there seemed to be about time. 'I know! I am aware of your impatience to reach Syria but the *kogge* will only take you so far, and we must arrange your onward transport from Larnaca. Fear not. You saved the *Anaan*. We will be suitably grateful for that act. No one will get you to your destination faster than we.'

Ezio unrolled the map and examined it. It was a fine, detailed work. He thought that if he was indeed obliged to spend time on that island, he knew from clues he had already picked up in his father's archives that Cyprus was not without interest to the Assassins, in the history of their eternal struggle with the Templars, and that it could well be that there he would find clues that might help him.

He would make good use of his time at Cyprus, but he hoped he would not have to tarry there long, effectively controlled as it was by the Templars, whatever appearances might be to the contrary.

But it was to be a longer journey than anyone might have anticipated. Hardly had they set sail from Crete after their brief landing at Heraklion – a matter of no more than three days – than the winds began to rage again. Southerly this time, fierce and warm still from their long journey out of north Africa. The *Qutaybah* battled them bravely, but by degrees she was beaten back north up the Aegean, fighting her retreat through the tangle of islands of the Dodecanese. It was a

week before the storms abated, not before claiming the lives of five mariners and an uncounted number of galley prisoners, who drowned at their oars. The ship put into Chios at last for a refit. Ezio dried his gear and cleaned his general equipment of any rust. The metal of his special weapons had never shown the least sign of oxidization in all the years he had had them. One of the many mysterious properties they had, which Leonardo had attempted to explain to him in vain.

Three precious months had been lost before the *Qutaybah* at last limped into the harbour of Larnaca. The envoy, who'd lost twenty pounds' weight on the voyage, through seasickness and vomiting, and who'd long since missed his conference, made immediate arrangements to travel back to Athens by the most direct route, travelling overland as far as he could.

Ezio wasted no time in looking up the Larnaca agent, Bekir, whose name Ma'Mun had given him. Bekir was welcoming and even deferential. Ezio Auditore da Firenze. The famous rescuer of ships! He was already the talk of Larnaca. Auditore *effendi*'s name was on every lip. Ah – the question of passage to Tortosa. The nearest mainland port to Masyaf in Syria. Yes, yes of course. Arrangements will be placed in hand immediately – this very day! If the *effendi* will be patient, while the necessary wheels are set in motion … The best possible accommodations will be at his disposal …

The lodgings arranged for Ezio were indeed splendid – a large, light apartment in a mansion built on a low hill above the town, overlooking it and the crystal sea beyond. But after too much time had passed, his patience grew thin.

'It is the Venetians,' explained the agent. 'They tolerate an Ottoman presence here, but only in a civil sense. The military authorities are, regrettably, wary of us. I feel that' – the man lowered his voice – 'were it not for the reputation of our Sultan, Bayezid, whose authority stretches far and whose power is mighty, we might not be tolerated at all.' He brightened. 'Perhaps *you* could help in your own cause, *effendi*.'

'In what way?'

'I thought, perhaps, that as a Venetian yourself …'

Ezio bit his lip.

But he was not a man to let time hang idly. While he waited, he studied Piri Reis' map, and something drew him, something half remembered that he had read, to hire a horse and ride down the coast to Limassol.

Once there, he found himself wandering through the motte and bailey of the deserted castle of Guy de Lusignan, built during the crusades but now neglected, like some once useful tool its owner has forgotten to throw away. As he walked through its empty, draughty corridors and looked at the wildflowers growing in

its courtyards, and the buddleia which clung to its crumbling ramparts, memories – at least, they seemed to be memories – prompted him to explore more deeply, to delve in the bowels of the keep, and the vaults beneath it.

Here, shrouded in crepuscular gloom, he found the desolate and empty remains of what had undoubtedly once been a vast archive. His lonely footfalls echoed in the dark labyrinth of rotting, empty shelving. The only occupants now were scuttling rats, whose eyes glinted suspiciously at him from dark corners as they scuttled away, giving him slanting, evil looks. And they could tell him nothing. He made as thorough a search as he could, but not a clue of what had been here remained.

Disheartened, he returned to the sunshine. The presence of a library here reminded him of the library he sought. Something was prompting him, though he could not put his finger on what it was. Stubbornly, he remained at the castle two days. Townspeople looked oddly at the dark, grizzled stranger who roamed their ruin.

Then Ezio remembered. Three centuries earlier, Cyprus had been the property of the Templars.

6

The Venetian authorities – or someone behind them – were clearly blocking his onward passage. This became obvious to him as soon as he confronted them. Florentines and Venetians might have been rivals, might have looked down on one another, but they shared the same country and the same language.

That cut no ice at all with the governor here. Domenico Garofoli was like a pencil – long, thin and grey. His black robes, exquisitely cut in the most costly damask, nevertheless hung from him like rags from a scarecrow. The heavy gold rings, set with rubies and pearls, clattered loosely on his bony fingers. His lips were so narrow you could hardly say they were there at all, and when his mouth was closed you could not see where it was in his face.

He was, of course, unfailingly polite – Ezio's action had done much to warm Ottoman–Venetian relations in the region – but he was clearly unwilling to do anything. The situation on the mainland eastwards – beyond the coastal towns that clung to the shore of the Mediterranean like the fingertips of a man hanging from a precipice – was fraught with danger. The Ottoman presence in Syria was mighty, and further Ottoman ambitions westwards much feared. Any mission not sanctioned by official diplomacy could trigger an international incident of the most dire proportions. That, at least, was Garofoli's excuse.

There was no way Ezio was going to find allies among his countrymen here.

Ezio listened, and listened, sitting politely with his hands on his knees as the governor droned on in a desiccated voice. And decided to take matters into his own hands.

That very evening he made his first reconnaissance of the docks. There were ships a-plenty moored there, dhows from Araby and North Africa bumping against Venetian busses and roccafortes, galleys and caravels. A Dutch fluyt looked promising, and there were men working aboard, loading thick bales of silk under an armed guard. But once Ezio had recognized the cargo, he knew that the fluyt would be homeward-bound, not outward, and he needed a ship sailing east.

He wandered further, keeping to the shadows, a dark form still as lithe and as fluid as a cat. But his search yielded him nothing.

Several days and nights passed in reconnoitring. He always took all his essential equipment with him, in case he struck lucky and could get away there and then. But each foray ended with the same result. Ezio's notoriety had marked him, and he had to go to some lengths to keep his identity secret. Even when he succeeded he found that no ship's master was headed in precisely the direction he wanted, or that they were – for some reason – unwilling to take him, no matter how big the bribe offered. He considered returning to Bekir, but resisted this in the end. Bekir already knew too much about his intentions.

The fifth night found him again at the docks. Fewer ships now, and apart from the Night Watchmen and their crews, who passed seldom, their lanterns swinging on long poles and their swords or truncheons always at the ready, no one else was about. Ezio made his way to the most distant quaysides, where smaller vessels were tied up. The distance to the mainland was not that great. Perhaps if he could … acquire … some boat of his own, he might be able to sail the seventy-five leagues or so alone.

Cautiously he set foot on a wooden jetty, its black boards shiny with seawater, along which five small single-sail dhows were ranked, fishing boats from the smell of them, but sturdy, and two of them had all their gear stowed aboard, as far as Ezio could see.

Then the hairs on the back of his neck prickled.

Too late. Before Ezio had time to turn, he was knocked flat on his face by the weight of the man who'd thrown himself on him. Big man, that much Ezio could sense. Very big. He was pinning Ezio down by the size of his body alone; it was like struggling under a massive, muscular eiderdown. Ezio wrenched his right hand free so that he could unleash his hidden blade, but his wrist was instantly grasped in a grip of iron. He noticed out of the corner of his eye that the hand that held his wrist was cuffed with a manacle from which two broken chain links dangled.

Gathering his strength, Ezio twisted violently and suddenly to his left, digging his elbow hard into a part of the eiderdown that he hoped was tender. He was fortunate. The man pinioning him grunted in pain and relaxed his hold a fraction. It was enough. Following through, Ezio heaved with his shoulder and managed to roll the body off his own. Like lightning he was up on one knee, his left hand on the man's throat, his right poised to strike.

Ezio's moment of triumph was short. The man knocked his right hand away, the iron manacle on his left hand, similarly adorned with a couple of chain links, struck Ezio's wrist painfully despite the protection of the hidden blade's harness. Ezio found his left wrist now caught in another vice-like grip, which slowly but inexorably forced his hold on the man's throat to weaken.

They rolled over, each trying to get the better of the other, putting in blows where they could, but although his assailant was bulky, he was quick, and Ezio's blade never found a mark. At last they separated and stood, grunting, out of breath, hunched, facing each other. The man was unarmed but the iron manacles could do a lot of damage, used as weapons.

Then, from a short distance away, there was a flash of light from a lantern and a cry.

'The Watch!' said the man. 'Down!'

Instinctively, Ezio followed his lead as they dived into the nearest dhow, flattening themselves in its bottom. Ezio's mind was racing. In the flash of light from the lantern, he had seen the man's face and recognized him. How could it be?

But there was no time to worry about that now. They could hear the footfalls of the Watch scurrying towards the jetty.

'They saw us, may Allah blind them,' said the man. 'Better see to them. You ready?'

Astonished, Ezio nodded mutely in the dark.

'I'll finish *you* off once we've seen to *them*,' the man added.

'I wouldn't bet on it.'

There was no time for any more talk as the five men of the Watch were already upon them. Fortunately they hesitated before throwing themselves down into the dark well of the boat where Ezio and his unlikely ally now stood, and contented themselves with standing on the jetty, waving their weapons and yelling threats.

The big man regarded them. 'Easy meat,' he said. 'But we'd better take them now, before they attract too much attention.'

In reply, Ezio braced himself, crouched, and leapt up to the jetty, catching its edge and hauling himself up onto it in one – these days – not quite fluid movement. In the moment it took him to catch his breath, three of the Watch were upon him, bludgeoning him to the ground with heavy truncheons, while a fourth man approached, swirling a short but wicked-looking sword. He raised it for the coup-de-grâce, but in that instant he was lifted bodily by the scruff of the neck from behind, and hurled howling backwards and upwards, to land with a sickening crash a long way further down the jetty, where he lay moaning, several of his bones broken.

As Ezio's three other attackers were distracted, Ezio sprang to his feet and snapped out his hidden blade, slicing down two of them in two quick, efficient strokes. Meanwhile, the big man was struggling with the lamp holder, another giant, who had thrown his pole aside and drawn a massive Damascus, which he

waved threateningly over the head of his opponent, who held him in a wrestler's body grip. Ezio could see that at any moment the thick blade would come down square into the broad back of the big man. He cursed himself for not having strapped on his gun, but it was too late for that now. He grabbed a fallen truncheon and, shoving the remaining watchman aside with his elbow, hurled it at the head of the lantern man.

His aim had – thank God! – been true. The truncheon struck the lantern man square between the eyes and he staggered back, falling to his knees. Then Ezio felt a sharp pain in his side. The surviving member of the Watch had drawn a dagger and stabbed him. He sank down, and, before his world went black, saw the big man running towards him.

7

When Ezio came to, he was lying on his back somewhere, and the world was rocking beneath him. Not violently, but steadily. It was almost comforting. He stayed where he was for a moment, eyes still closed, feeling a breeze on his face, not quite wanting to come back to whatever reality was waiting to confront him, smelling the sea air.

The sea air?

He opened his eyes. The sun was up and he could see an unbroken expanse of blue sky. Then a dark shape came between the sky and him. A head and shoulders. A concerned face, looking down at him.

'You're back. Good,' said the big man.

Ezio started to sit up, and as he did so the pain from his wound hit him. He groaned and put a hand to his side. He felt bandages.

'Flesh wound. Not too deep. Nothing to make a fuss about.'

Ezio raised himself. His next thought was for his kit. He looked around swiftly. There it was, neatly stashed in his leather bag, and it looked untouched. 'Where are we?' he asked.

'Where do you think? At sea.'

Painfully, Ezio stood and looked about him. They were in one of the fishing dhows, cutting steadily through the water, the sail above his head fat with wind. He turned, and could see Larnaca, a speck on the coastline of Cyprus, on the distant horizon behind them.

'What happened?'

'You saved my life. I saved yours.'

'Why?'

'It's the Law. Pity though. After what you did to me, you had it coming.'

The man had had his back to him, working the tiller, but now he turned to Ezio. For the first time Ezio had a good look at his face, and recognized him instantly.

'You wrecked my ships, curse you. I'd been stalking the *Anaan* for days. That prize would have taken me back to Egypt a rich man. Instead, thanks to you, they made a galley slave of me. Me!' The big man was indignant.

‘Egypt? You’re not a Berber then?’

‘Berber be damned. I’m a Mamluk, though I may not look like one dressed in these rags. Soon as we get there I’m treating myself to a woman, a decent plate of *kofta*, and a good suit of clothes.’

Ezio looked around him again, stumbling and then regaining his balance as an unexpected wave chopped aslant the bow.

‘Not much of a seaman, are you?’

‘Gondolas are more my line.’

‘Gondolas? Pah!’

‘If you wanted to kill me—’

‘Can you blame me? It was the only reason I hung around in that cesspool of a Venetian port after I’d escaped. I couldn’t believe my luck when I saw you. I’d almost given up – I was looking for a way out myself, down there.’

Ezio grinned. ‘I don’t blame you.’

‘You chucked me in a tank and left me to drown!’

‘You could swim well enough. Any fool could see that.’

It was the big man’s turn to grin. ‘Ah! I might have known I couldn’t appeal to your compassion by pretending that I couldn’t.’

‘You repaid your debt to me, you saved my life. But why did you bring me with you?’

The big man spread his hands. ‘You were wounded. If I’d left you, they’d have come for you, you wouldn’t have lasted the night. And what a waste of my effort that would have been. Besides, you can make yourself useful on this tub, landlubber though you are.’

‘I can look after myself.’

The big man’s eyes grew serious. ‘I know you can, *effendi*. Maybe I just wanted your company – Ezio Auditore.’

‘You know my name.’

‘You’re famous. Vanquisher of pirates. Not that that would have saved you after killing a team of watchmen and trying to escape.’

Ezio thought about that. Then he said. ‘What do they call you?’

The big man drew himself up. His dignity belied the galley slave’s rags he still wore. ‘I am al-Scarab, scourge of the White Sea.’

‘Oh,’ said Ezio wryly. ‘Pardon me.’

‘Temporarily on my back foot,’ al-Scarab added ruefully. ‘But not for long. When we get there, I’ll have a new ship and crew within a week.’

‘When we get where?’

‘Didn’t I tell you? The nearest port worth anything, that’s also in Mamluk hands – Acre.’

8

The time had come.

It was hard to leave, but his mission was imperative, and it called Ezio urgently onward. His time in Acre had been one of rest and recuperation, forcing him to be patient as his wound healed, for he knew his quest would come to nothing if he were not fully fit for it. And meeting al-Scarab, disastrous as it would have been if things had gone differently, showed him that if a guardian angel existed, he had one.

The big pirate, whom he had bested in the battle aboard the *Anaan*, had proved himself to be more than just a life-saver. Al-Scarab had extended family in Acre, and they welcomed Ezio as the rescuer of their cousin and as his brother-in-arms. Al-Scarab said nothing of his defeat in the *Anaan* incident and enjoined Ezio on pain of unmentionable retribution to follow suit. But the escape from Larnaca was boosted into a fight of epic proportions.

'There were fifty of them …' al-Scarab would start his story, and the number of perfidious Venetian assailants they'd been obliged to fight off had reached ten times that number by his tenth telling of the tale. Open-mouthed and wide-eyed, his cousins listened spellbound, and never breathed a word about any of the inconsistencies that crept in. At least he didn't throw in a sea monster, Ezio thought, drily.

One thing which was not invention, were the warnings that came from al-Scarab's family of the dangers Ezio would have to be prepared for in his onward journey. They tried hard to persuade him to take an armed escort with him, but this Ezio steadfastly declined to do. He would ride his own road. He would not subject others to the perils which he knew he must face.

Soon after his arrival at Acre, Ezio took the opportunity to write a long-overdue letter to his sister. He chose his words with care, conscious that this might be the last time he would ever communicate with her.

Acre
xx novembre MDX

My dearest sister Claudia

I have been in Acre a week now, safe and in high spirits, but prepared for the worst. The men and women who have fed and sheltered me here, also give me warning that the road to Masyaf is overrun by mercenaries and bandits not native to this land. What this could mean, I fear to guess.

When I first set out from Roma ten months ago, I did so with a single purpose: to discover what our father could not. In the letter you know of, written the year before my birth, he makes a single mention of a library hidden beneath the floors of Altaïr's former castle. A sanctum full of invaluable wisdom.

But what will I find when I arrive? Who will greet me? A host of eager Templars, as I fear most strongly? Or nothing but the whistling of a cold and lonely wind? Masyaf has not been home to the Assassins for almost 300 years now. Does it remember us? Are we still welcome?

Ah, I am weary of this fight, Claudia … Weary not because I am tired, but because our struggle seems to move in one direction only … towards chaos. Today I have more questions than answers. This is why I have come so far: to find clarity. To find the wisdom left behind by the Great Mentor, so that I may better understand the purpose of our fight, and my place in it.

Should anything happen to me, dear Claudia … should my skills fail me, or my ambition lead me astray, do not seek revenge or retribution in my memory, but fight to continue the search for truth so that all may benefit. My story is one of many thousands, and the world will suffer if it ends too soon.

Your brother,
Ezio Auditore da Firenze

Al-Scarab, in the course of fitting out for his own new ventures, had also seen to it that Ezio had the attention of the best doctors, the best tailors, the best chefs and the best women Acre could provide. His blades were honed and sharpened, his kit was fully cleaned, repaired, replaced where necessary and thoroughly overhauled.

As the day approached for Ezio to leave, al-Scarab presented him with two fine horses – 'A present from my uncle – he breeds them – but I don't have much use for them in my trade' – tough little Arabs, with soft leather tack and one fine, high-ended, tooled saddle. Ezio continued to refuse any escort, but accepted supplies for his journey, which would carry him overland, through what had once, long ago, been the crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem.

And now the time of parting had come. The last leg in a long journey, and whether it would be completed or not, Ezio had no way of telling. But for him there was *only* the journey. It had to be made.

'Go with your god, Ezio.'

'Baraq Allah feeq, my friend,' Ezio replied, taking the big pirate's hand.

'We'll meet again.'

'Yes.'

Both men wondered in their hearts if they were telling the truth, but the words comforted them. It didn't matter. They looked each other in the eye and knew that in their different ways they were part of the same fellowship.

Ezio mounted the larger of the two horses, the bay, and turned her head round.

Without a backward glance he headed out of the city, north.

9

Masyaf was 200 miles – as the crow flies – from Acre. The seemingly gentle desert land that lay between the two points was in fact very far from gentle. The great Ottoman outward thrust from its original core had been going on relentlessly for 200 years, and had culminated in the taking of Constantinople by the twenty-year-old Sultan Mehmed II in 1453. But still the Turkish tentacles extended, reaching westwards as far as Bulgaria and beyond, and south and east into Syria and what had once been the Holy Land. The eastern coastal strip of the White Sea, with its vital ports and its access by water westwards, was a jewel in the crown, and the Ottoman grip on it was as yet fragile. Ezio was under no illusions about what battles he would have to face as he made his lonely way north. He followed the coast for most of the way, keeping the sparkling sea in view to his left, riding the high cliffs and the tattered scrublands that topped them, travelling in the hours of dawn and dusk, hiding for four hours when the sun was at its highest and resting again for four hours at night under the stars.

Travelling alone had its advantages. He could blend in far more easily than would have been possible if he'd had an escort, and his keen eyes discerned danger points ahead well enough in advance either to skirt them or wait until they had passed. This was bandit country, where half-disciplined gangs of unemployed mercenaries roamed, killing travellers and each other for what they could get, surviving, as it seemed to Ezio, merely for the sake of it, in a countryside still reeling in the aftermath of centuries of war. Men turned feral, no longer thinking, no longer hoping or fearing; men who had lost any sense of conscience. Ruthless and reckless, and as callous as they were remorseless.

Fights there were, when they could not be avoided, and every one of them pointless, leaving a few more dead for the vultures and the crows, which were the only creatures truly to thrive in this wasteland forgotten by God. Once, Ezio saved a frightened village from marauders, and once, a woman from torture, rape and death. But for how long? And what would become of them after he had passed by? He was not God, he could not be everywhere and here, where once Christ had trodden, God showed no evidence of looking after His own.

The further north he rode, the heavier Ezio's heart became. Only the fire of the quest kept him on the path. He tied brushwood to his horses' tails to eradicate his tracks as he passed, and at night, he spread branches of thorn to rest on, so that he would never quite sleep. Eternal vigilance was not only the price of freedom, but of survival. Though the passing years had robbed him of some of his strength, that was compensated for by experience, and the fruit of the training, which had been drummed into him by Paola and Mario so long ago in Florence and Monteriggioni, had never rotted. Though Ezio sometimes felt that he couldn't go on, that he wouldn't go on, he went on.

Two hundred miles as the crow flies. But this was a harsh winter, and there were many detours and delays along the road.

The Year of Our Lord 1511 had already started, and it was the Feast of St Hilary once again, when Ezio saw the mountains rearing ahead of him.

He drew in a deep breath of cold air.

Masyaf was near.

Three weeks later, on foot now, both horses dead in the frozen passes behind him, and on his conscience, for they had been more stalwart and loyal companions than many men, Ezio stood in sight of his goal.

An eagle soared high in the hard clear sky.

Battered from the journey Ezio drew his gaze from it, pulled himself up and over a low rough wall and stood motionless for a moment, scanning the scene with keen eyes.

Masyaf. After twelve weary months on the road; such a long journey – the ways deep and the weather sharp.

Crouching now, just in case, and keeping still as he instinctively checked his weapons, Ezio kept watching for any sign of movement. Any.

Not a soul appeared on the battlements. Scuds of snow twisted in a cutting wind. But no sign of a man. The place seemed deserted. As he'd expected from what he'd read of it. But life had taught him that it was always best to make sure. He stayed still.

Not a sound but the wind. Then – something. A scraping? To his left ahead of him a handful of pebbles skeetered down a bare incline. He tensed, rose slightly, head up between ducked shoulders. Then the arrow, coming from nowhere, whacked into his right shoulder, through the body armour there.

10

The dawn was cold and grey. In its stillness, Ezio roused himself from his memories and snapped all his concentration to the present as the heard the footfall of guards' boots on the flagstones, approaching his cell. This was the moment.

He'd pretend to be weak, and that wasn't too hard a thing to do. He was thirstier than he'd been in a long time, and hungrier, but the beaker and the food still stood untouched on the table. He lay on the floor face down, his hood pulled low over his face.

He heard the door of his cell crash open, and the men came in. They reached under his shoulders and half lifting him, dragged him out along the bare grey stone corridor outside. Looking down at the floor as he was hauled over it, Ezio saw marked on it, laid out in a darker stone, the great symbol of the Assassins, their insignia since time immemorial.

The corridor gave way at length to a wider space, a kind of hall, open on one side. Ezio felt keen fresh air on his face, and it revived him. He raised his head slightly and saw that beyond him there were tall openings demarcated by narrow columns, and beyond them a wide open view of the pitiless mountains. They were still high in the tower.

The guards pulled him to his feet and he shook himself free of them. They stood back slightly, halberds at the ready, lowered but pointing at him. Facing him, his back to the void, stood the captain of the day before. He held a noose in his hand.

'You are a tenacious man, Ezio,' the captain said. 'To come all this way for a glimpse inside Altaïr's castle. It shows heart.'

He gestured to his men to stand further back, leaving Ezio standing alone. Then he went on, 'But you're an old hound now. Better to put you out of your misery, than see you whimper to a sad end.'

Ezio turned slightly to address the man directly. That tiny movement, he noted to his satisfaction, was enough to make the halberdmen flinch, and steady their weapons on him.

'Any last words before I kill you?' Ezio said.

The captain was made of sterner stuff than his men. He stood firm and laughed. ‘I wonder how long it will take for the buzzards to pick your bones clean, as your body dangles from these parapets?’

‘There’s an eagle up there somewhere. He’ll keep the buzzards away.’

‘A lot of good that’ll do you. Come forward or are you afraid to die? You wouldn’t want to have to be dragged to your death, would you?’

Ezio moved forward slowly, every sense taut.

‘That’s good,’ said the captain, and Ezio immediately sensed his slight relaxation. Did the man really think he was giving in? Was he that vain? That stupid? If so, all the better. But perhaps, after all, this ugly man, who smelt of sweat and cooked meat, was right. The moment of death had to come sometime.

Beyond the wide window between the columns a narrow wooden platform projected over the void, perhaps ten feet long and four wide, constructed of six rough planks. It looked ancient and unsafe. The captain bowed in an ironic gesture of invitation. Ezio stepped forward again, waiting for his moment, but at the same time wondering if it would come. The planks creaked ominously under his weight, and the air was cold around him. He looked at the sky and the mountains. Then he saw the eagle coasting, fifty or a 100 feet below him, its white pinions spread, and somehow that gave him hope.

Then something else happened.

Ezio had noticed another similar platform, projecting from the tower at the same level some fifteen feet to his right. And now, on it, alone, walking fearlessly forward, was the young cowled man in white he had glimpsed in the battle. As Ezio watched, his breath suspended, the man seemed to be turning towards him, to be making the beginning of a gesture …

And then, again, the vision faded, and there was nothing but the wind and the occasional scatter of gusting snow. Even the eagle had disappeared from sight.

The captain approached, noose in hand. Ezio fleetingly noticed that there was plenty of slack in the rope which trailed behind it.

‘No eagle here that I can see,’ said the captain. ‘I wager it’ll take the buzzards no more than three days.’

‘I’ll let you know,’ Ezio replied, evenly.

A knot of guards had come up behind the captain, but it was the captain himself, standing close behind Ezio, who pulled down his hood, slipped the noose over his head, and pulled it tight around his neck.

‘Now!’ said the captain.

Now!

At the very moment that he felt the captain’s hands on his shoulders, ready to shove him into oblivion, Ezio raised his right arm, crooked it, and drove his

elbow violently backwards. As the captain fell back with a cry, stumbling into his companions, Ezio stooped and took up the slack of the rope where it still lay on the planking and, dodging between the three men, spun and looped the slack round the stumbling captain's neck. Then he leapt from the platform into the void.

The captain had tried to recoil, but too late. He was slammed to the planks under the impact of Ezio's weight as he fell. The planks shuddered as his head struck them. The rope snapped taut, all but breaking the captain's neck as it did so. Turning blue, his hands went to his neck as he kicked and struggled against death.

Uttering all the oaths they knew, the guards drew their swords and moved forward fast, hacking at the rope to free their officer. When the rope was cut, the accursed Ezio Auditore would plummet to his death on the rocks 500 feet below, and as long as he was dead, what did the manner of it matter?

At the rope's end, twirling in space, Ezio had both hands between the noose and his neck, straining to keep it from cutting into his windpipe. He scanned the scene below him. He was dangling close to the walls. There had to be something he could catch to break his fall. But if there wasn't, this was a better way to meet death than going to it meekly.

Above, on the dangerously swaying platform, the guards at last succeeded in severing the rope, which by now was drawing blood from the captain's neck. And Ezio found himself falling, falling …

But at the moment he felt the rope go loose, he swung his body closer to the walls of the castle. Masyaf was built for Assassins by Assassins. It would not forsake him. He had seen a piece of broken scaffolding projecting from the wall fifty feet below. He guided his body towards it as he plummeted downwards. He caught it, wincing in pain as his arm was wrenched almost free of its socket. But the scaffolding held, and he held, and, grinding his teeth with effort, he hauled himself up until he could get a grip with both hands.

But it wasn't over yet. The guards, leaning out, had seen what had happened, and began to lay hold of anything they could to throw to dislodge him. Rocks and stones and jagged pieces of broken wood hailed down on him. Ezio looked around desperately. Over to his left, an escarpment ran up to the wall, perhaps twenty feet away from where he now was. If he could swing from the scaffolding and gain enough momentum to throw himself across that distance, there was a faint chance that he could roll down the escarpment. At its foot he could see the edge of a cliff top, from which a crumbling stone bridge stretched over a chasm to where a narrow path clung to the side of the mountain opposite.

Ducking under the rain of debris from above, Ezio started to swing backwards and forwards, his hands slipping on the ice-smooth wood of the scaffolding; but they held, and he soon built up impetus. The moment came when he felt he just couldn't hold on any more, he'd have to risk it. He summoned all his energy into one last powerful backswing, hurling himself into space as his body moved forward again, and spread-eagling himself in the air as he flew towards the escarpment.

He landed heavily, badly, and it winded him. Before he had time to recover his balance he was tumbling down the slope, bouncing over the rough ground, but gradually able to guide his battered body in the general direction of the bridge. He knew this was vital, for if he did not end at exactly the right spot, he would be hurled over the cliff's edge into God knew what void beneath. He was going too fast but he had no control over his speed. He kept his nerve somehow and at last he came to a stop – ten feet onto the trembling bridge itself.

A sudden thought struck him: how old was this bridge? It was narrow, single-span and far, far below he could hear the crashing of angry water over rocks, invisible in the depths of the black chasm beneath. The shock of his weight thrown upon it had shaken the bridge. How long was it since anyone had crossed it? Its stonework was already crumbling, weakened with age, its mortar rotted. As he got to his feet, to his horror, he saw a crack snap open right across its width not five feet behind him. The crack soon widened, and the masonry on either side of it began to fall, tumbling crazily down into the dark abyss.

As Ezio watched, time itself seemed to slow down. There was no retreat now. He realized immediately what was going to happen. Turning, he started to sprint, summoning every muscle in his straining body to this one last effort. Across the bridge to the other side he ran, the structure fracturing and plummeting behind him. Twenty yards to go – ten – he could feel the stonework plunging away just as his heels left it. And at last, his chest practically splitting with the effort of breathing, he lay upright against the grey rock of the mountainside, his cheek pressed to it, his feet secure on the narrow path, unable to think, or do anything, listening to the sounds of the stones of the bridge as they fell into the torrent below, listening to the sounds ebb and ebb until there was nothing, no sound at all but the wind.

11

Gradually, Ezio’s breathing calmed and levelled, and the aches in his muscles, forgotten in the crisis, began to return. But there was much to do before he could allow his body the rest it needed. What he had to do was feed it. He hadn’t eaten or drunk anything for nearly twenty-four hours.

He bandaged his grazed hands as well as he could, using a scarf torn in two drawn from within his tunic. He cupped a palm to capture a trickle of water which was running off the rock against which his cheek was pressed. Partly assuaged, he pushed away from the surface he’d been leaning on, and checked himself over. No broken bones, a slight sprain in the left side, where he’d been wounded, but nothing else, nothing serious.

He surveyed the scene. No one seemed to have set out in pursuit but they would have watched his fall down the escarpment and his run across the collapsing bridge – perhaps they hadn’t noticed that he’d made it – perhaps they’d just assumed that he hadn’t. But he couldn’t discount the possibility that there’d be search parties out, if only to recover his body. The Templars would want to be quite sure that the Mentor of their arch-enemy was indeed dead.

He looked at the mountainside next to him. Better to climb than to use the path. He didn’t know where it led, and it was too narrow to afford him room to manoeuvre if he had to fight. It looked climbable. At the very least he might be able to reach some pockets of snow, and really slake his thirst. He shook himself, grunting, and set about his task.

He was glad that he was dressed in dark colours, for he had no need to make any effort to blend with the rock face he was crawling up. Hand- and footholds were easy to find at first, though there were times when he had to stretch hard, times when his muscles shrieked in protest, and once a shard of rock flaked off in his hand, nearly causing him to crash back down the 100 feet or so he’d already covered. The worst thing – and the best – was the thin but constant stream of water which fell on him from above. Worst, because the wet rocks were slippery; best, because a waterfall meant a creek, or at least a beck, up above.

But half an hour's climb brought him to the top of what turned out to be, not a mountain but a cliff, since the ground he finally hauled himself up onto was level and covered with patches of rough, tussocky grass. A kind of all but barren alpine meadow, bordered on two sides by more walls of black and grey rock, but opening westwards quite some way – as far as Ezio could see. A mountain pass, except for the fact that, behind him, it led nowhere. Perhaps once, long ago, it had. An ancient earthquake might well have caused the cliffs he'd just climbed, and the gulley into which the bridge had fallen.

Ezio sped to one side of the little valley to reconnoitre. Where there were passes, where there was water, there could also be people. He waited, near motionless, for another half an hour before venturing forward, shaking his muscles to keep them warm – they had begun to stiffen with the long period of immobility. He was wet, he was getting cold. He could not afford to be out here for too long. It was one thing to escape the Templars, but his effort would be wasted if he now fell victim to Nature.

He moved closer to the stream, locating it by the chuckling of its water. Stooping by its bank, he drank as much as he dared without glutting himself. He followed it. A few woody shrubs began to appear by its banks, and soon he came upon a stunted coppice by the side of a pool. Here, he paused. It would be a miracle if there was anything living up here, so far from the village that squatted below the castle of Masyaf, any animal he could catch and eat; but if there was a pool, there was also the faintest chance that there might be fish.

He knelt, and peered into the depths of the dark water. Still as a fishing heron, he disciplined himself to be patient. And then, at last, a ripple, a faint one, which disappeared as soon as it had unsettled the water's surface, but enough to show him that there was something alive in there. He continued his watch. Little flies hovered low over the pool. Some flew over and harassed him, attracted by his body heat. Not daring to swat them away, he endured their tickling attentions and their tiny, vicious bites.

Then he saw it – a large, plump body, the colour of a corpse, moving sluggishly six inches below the surface. Better than he'd dared hope – it looked like a carp, maybe, or something very like it. As he watched, another, much darker, joined it, and then a third, its scales coppery-gold.

Ezio waited for them to do what he expected them to do – put their snouts to the surface and gulp air. That would be his moment. All his attention focused, he tensed his body and steeled his hands.

The dark fish made its move, bubbles erupted as a fat mouth appeared.

Ezio sprang.

And fell back, elated, the big fish wriggling frantically in his grasp but unable to slide out. He laid it on the ground beside him and despatched it with a stone.

There was no way he could cook this. He'd have to eat it raw. But then he looked again at the stone he'd used to kill it, and remembered the shard which had flaked off in his hand during his climb. Flint! With luck, he could start a fire – to dry his clothes as much as to cook with. Raw fish didn't bother him – he'd read, besides, that somewhere in an unimaginable country far away to the east there was a people who actually regarded it as a delicacy. But wet clothes were quite another thing. As for the fire itself, he'd take the risk. From what he'd seen, he was probably the first human in this valley for 1000 years, and its towering sides hid it from view for miles.

He gathered together some brushwood from the coppice and after a few moments' experiment he had managed to start a tiny red glow in a handful of grass. Carefully, he placed it under a prepared tent of twigs, burning himself as his fire immediately flared. It burned well, giving off little smoke, and that was thin and light, immediately whisked into nothingness by the breeze

For the first time since his first sighting of Masyaf, Ezio smiled.

Despite the cold, to save time, he took off his clothes to dry them by the fire on rudimentary brushwood frames while the fish cooked and bubbled on a simple spit. Less than an hour later, the fire kicked out and its traces scattered, he felt a certain warmth in his belly and was able, soon afterwards, to don garments which, if not laundry fresh, were warm and sufficiently dry to wear comfortably. They would have to finish drying as he wore them. As for his exhaustion, that would have to keep. He'd resisted the desire to sleep by the fire and the pool, a fight as tough as any he'd had on the road, but now he was rewarded by a second wind.

He felt equal to the task of returning to the castle. He needed his gear, and then he needed to unlock the secrets of the place if his quest was to mean anything.

As he retraced his steps, he noticed, shortly before he reached the cliff he'd climbed, that on the southern side of the valley another pathway led upwards along the side of that rock face. Who had hewn these pathways? Men from the dawn of time? Ezio had no leisure to ponder this, but was grateful that it was there. It rose steeply eastwards in the direction of Masyaf. Ezio started to climb.

After an ascent of some 500 feet, the path ended on a narrow promontory, where a few foundation stones testified to the presence long ago of a lookout tower, where guards would have been able to scan the country around and give the castle advance warning of any approaching army or caravan. Looking eastwards and down, the great complex of Masyaf, with its rearing walls and its

cupola'd towers, spread out beneath him. Ezio focused hard, and his eyes, as keen as an eagle's, began to pick out the details which would help him return.

Far below, he discerned a rope bridge across the same chasm formerly spanned by the stone one he had run across. Near it was a guard post. There was no other access to the castle, as far as he could see, from the side he was on, but at the far side of the bridge the path to the castle was relatively clear. The way down to the bridge, on this side, was another matter. An all but sheer cascade of black rock – enough to daunt the surest-footed ibex. And it was in full view of the guard post on the castle side of the bridge.

Ezio looked at the sun. It was just past its zenith now. He calculated it'd take four to five hours to reach the castle. He needed to be inside before darkness fell.

He clambered down from the promontory, and began his descent, taking it slowly, taking care not to dislodge the jumble of loose rocks, in case they tumbled down the mountain side and alerted the Templars guarding the bridge. It was delicate work, but the sun would be setting behind him and therefore in the eyes of any watchers below, and Ezio was grateful for its protection. He'd be down before it set.

At last he reached the security and concealment of a large outcrop on level ground not fifty yards from the west side of the bridge. It had grown colder and the wind was getting up. The bridge – of black tarred rope, with narrow wooden slats as its walkway – swung and rattled. As Ezio watched, two guards emerged from the post and walked a little way to and fro on their side, but did not venture onto the bridge itself. They were armed with crossbows and swords.

The light was dull and flat now, it was difficult to judge distances. But the lessening light was to Ezio's advantage, and he blended in easily with his surroundings. Like a shadow, crouching, he made his way closer to the bridge, but there would be no cover once he was on it, and he was unarmed.

He paused once more about ten feet away, watching the guards. They looked cold and bored, Ezio noted to his satisfaction – they would not be alert. Nothing else had changed, except that someone had lit a lamp within the post, so he knew there were more than two of them.

He needed some kind of weapon. On the climb down and on this final approach he had been too preoccupied with not giving his position away to look for something, but he hadn't forgotten that the mountain stone was flint, and there were plenty of loose shards at his feet. They glinted black in the dying light. He selected one, a blade-like flake about twelve inches long and two wide. He picked it up and in doing so was too hasty, causing other stones to clatter. He froze. But there was no reaction. The bridge was thirty yards across. He could

easily be halfway before the guards noticed him. But he'd have to make a move now. He braced himself, stood up and hurled himself forward.

It wasn't easy going once he was on the bridge. It swayed and creaked alarmingly in the now savage wind, and he had to grab its guide ropes to retain his balance. All that cost time. And the guards had seen him. They shouted challenges, which gained him a second or two, but seeing him come on, they unslung their bows, fitted bolts, and fired. As they did so, five more guards, bows already primed, came rushing out of the post.

The bad light affected their aim but it was close enough, and Ezio had to duck and dodge. At one point in the middle of the bridge an old plank snapped under him and his foot caught, but he managed to pull it free before his leg sank through the gap – then he would have been done for. As it was, he was lucky to be able to avoid more than a grazing shot as a bolt caressed his neck, ripping through the back of his hood. He could feel its heat on his skin.

They'd stopped firing now and were doing something else. Ezio strained to see.

Winches!

They had plenty of slack rope on the winches and were preparing to let it go, letting it spin out as soon as they unlocked the winches and let them freewheel. They could haul the bridge up again after they'd tumbled him into the gulf below.

Merda, Ezio thought, half running, half stumbling forward. Twice in one day! With five yards to go, he threw himself into the air as the bridge fell away beneath him, sailing forward and landing on one guard, knocking another flat, plunging the flint blade into the first man's neck and trying to bring it out again fast, but it broke off where it was, it must have snagged on bone. Finding his feet, spinning round, he hauled the second guard, not yet recovered, roughly towards him, and swiftly drawing the man's own sword pulled it back and ran him through with it.

The other three had abandoned their bows and drawn their own swords, penning him in with his back to the precipice. Ezio thought fast. He'd seen no other men around, no one had gone to raise the alarm, he'd have to finish these three here and then get into the castle before anything was discovered. But the men were big, and they hadn't been on guard; they were fresh and rested.

Ezio hefted the sword in his hand. He looked from one face to the other. But what was it he now saw in their eyes? Fear? Was it *fear*?

'You Assassin dog!' one of them spat, though his voice all but trembled. 'You must be in league with the Devil!'

‘If the Devil is anywhere, he’s with you,’ snarled Ezio, throwing himself forward, knowing that he could take advantage of their fear that he was in some way filled with a supernatural force. *Se solo!*

They closed then, shouting oaths so loudly that Ezio had to make haste to cut them down, to silence them. Their blows were wild and panicky, and the job was quickly done. He dragged the bodies into the guard post but there was no time to haul the bridge back up, besides, that was an impossible job for a man alone. Briefly, he considered changing clothes with one of the guards, but that would have wasted precious time, and the gathering darkness was on his side.

Ezio started up the path leading to the castle, grateful for the shadows that had begun to gather at its sides. He reached the foot of its walls on its blind side, unmolested. The sun had all but set, only a red glow showing now behind the distant cliffs and mountains to the west. It was cold and the wind insistent. The castle, old as it was, had weathered stones and they afforded enough hand- and footholds for a climber who knew what he was doing. Ezio, keeping in mind a picture of the plan of the fortress, which he had studied in Rome, drew on the last reserves of his energy and began the ascent. A hundred feet, he calculated, and then he’d be within the outer sanctum. After that, he knew where the connecting gates were which led to the inner fortifications, the towers and the keep.

The climb was harder than he’d thought. His arms and legs ached, and he wished he had some kind of implement which would help extend his reach, which could grip on the holds inflexibly, extending the power of his hands. But he willed himself upwards, and, as the last embers of sunset died behind the black ramparts of mountain, giving way to the first pale stars, Ezio dropped onto a walkway which ran a few feet below the crenellations of the Outer Wall. Fifty yards on either side of him were watchtowers, but the guards in them were looking out and down – there was a commotion, dimly heard, from the direction of the guard house by the bridge.

He raised his eyes to the Keep Tower. They would have stowed his kit – his precious saddlebags with his weapons – in the secure cellar storeroom below it.

He dropped from the walkway to the ground, always keeping to the shadows. He bore left, towards where he knew the gate giving access to the Keep lay.

12

Soft-footed as a puma, and ever seeking the darkest routes, Ezio reached his goal without further confrontations. Just as well, for the last thing he wanted was another noisy fight. If they found him again, they wouldn't let him linger, give him the ghost of a chance of escape – they'd kill him on the spot, skewer him like a rat. There were few guards about – all he'd seen were those on the battlements. They must all be out, looking for him in the pale uncertain light afforded by the myriad stars – and the scrum at the guard post would have made them redouble their efforts, for that had given them proof beyond doubt that he was not dead.

There were two older Templar guards sitting at a rough wooden table near the entrance to the cellar storeroom. On the table was a large pewter jug of what looked like red wine and two wooden beakers. Both guards had their heads and arms on the table. They were snoring. Ezio approached with extreme caution, having seen the ring of keys hanging at the side of one of the men.

He had not forgotten the pickpocketing skills which the Assassin *madame* Paola had taught him as a young man in Florence. Very carefully, trying to keep the keys from jangling – for the slightest sound, which might awaken the men, could spell his doom – he lifted the ring, and with his other hand awkwardly untied the leather thong which attached it to the man's belt. At one point the loosening knot snagged and stuck, and in Ezio's efforts to free it, he tugged too hard and the man stirred. Ezio became a statue, watching vigilantly, both hands engaged, and unable to make a move for either guard's weapon. But the man merely snuffled and went on sleeping, creasing his brow uncomfortably, perhaps at some dream.

At last the key ring was in Ezio's hands, and he crept stealthily down the torchlit aisle beyond the guards, looking at the heavy ironclad wooden doors which ran along either side.

He had to work fast, but it was a long job, checking which key on the big steel ring fitted into what lock, and at the same time checking that the keys didn't make any noise as he manipulated them. At the fifth door he struck lucky. It

opened into a veritable armoury, weapons of various sorts stacked neatly on wooden shelves running the length of the walls.

He'd taken a torch from its sconce near the door, and by its light he soon found his bags. A quick inventory indicated that nothing had been taken, or even, as far as he could see, touched. He breathed a sigh of relief because these were the last things he wanted the Templars to get their hands on. The Templars had some good minds working for them, and it would have been disastrous if they'd been able to copy the hidden blades.

He gave them a brief inspection. He'd travelled with only what he considered to be his essential gear, and he found, after double-checking, that everything he'd brought with him was definitely in place. He buckled on the scimitar, drawing it to make sure its blade was still keen, then slid it into its scabbard, slamming it firmly home. He strapped the bracer to his left arm and the unbroken hidden blade to his left wrist. The broken blade and its harness he stowed in the bags – he wasn't going to leave that for the Templars, even in its current state, and there was always the chance that he'd be able to get it repaired. He'd cross that bridge when he came to it. He stored the spring-loaded pistol with its ammunition in the bags, and, taking as much time as he dared, took out and checked that his parachute hadn't been damaged. The parachute was new – an invention of Leonardo's that he hadn't used in action yet. But the practice runs he'd made with it had more than proved its potential. He folded the tent-like structure up neatly and returned it to the rest of his kit, slinging the bags over his shoulder, strapping them securely, and made his way back the way he'd come, past the still sleeping guards. Once outside, he started to climb.

He located a secluded vantage point on a high turret of the Keep. He'd selected the place because it overlooked Masyaf's rear garden, under which, if his research on the castle plans had been correct, the Templars would be concentrating their efforts to locate the library of the great Assassin Mentor, Altaïr, who'd ruled the Brotherhood from here three centuries ago. It was the legendary library of the Assassins, and the source of all their knowledge and power, if his father's letter was to be believed.

Ezio by now had no doubt at all that nothing less than a search for it would explain the Templars' presence in this place.

On the edge of the turret's outer wall, looking down at the garden, was the large stone statue of an eagle, wings folded, but so lifelike that it appeared to be about to take flight and swoop down on some unsuspecting prey. He tested the statue. For all its weight, it rocked very slightly when he applied pressure to it.

Perfect.

Ezio took up his position by the eagle, and prepared to settle down for the rest of the night, knowing nothing would happen before dawn. If he did not take this opportunity to rest, he would not be able to act with efficiency when the moment came. The Templars might have taken him for some kind of demi-devil, but he knew only too well that he was just a man, like any other.

But before he rested a sudden doubt assailed him and he scanned the garden below. There was no sign of any excavations. Could it be that he was mistaken?

Drawing on the lessons he had learned and the powers he had developed in training, he focused his eyes so that they assumed the power of an eagle's, and examined the ground beneath him minutely. By concentrating hard, he was at last able to discern a dull glow emanating from a section of mosaic flooring in a once ornamental, now overgrown, bower immediately beneath. Satisfied, he smiled and relaxed. The mosaic depicted an image of the goddess Minerva.

The sun had scarcely brushed the battlements to the east when Ezio, refreshed by his short sleep and alert, crouched by the stone eagle, knowing that the moment had come. He also knew he had to act fast – every moment he spent here increased the risk of detection. The Templars would not have given up on him yet, and they would be fired up with hatred – his escape, when they had him in the very grip of death, would have left them howling for vengeance.

Ezio gauged distances and angles and, when he was satisfied, he placed his boot against the stone eagle and gave the statue a good hard push. It rocked on its plinth and then fell out and away over the parapet, tumbling end over end towards the mosaic floor far below. Ezio watched it for barely a second just to verify its course before he threw himself into the air after it executing a Leap of Faith. It was some time since he had performed one, and now the old exhilaration returned. Down they fell, the eagle first, Ezio plummeting in the same trajectory fifteen feet above it. Towards what looked like very solid ground.

Ezio didn't have time to pray that he hadn't made a mistake. If he had, the time for praying – for everything – would soon be over.

The eagle landed first, in the centre of the mosaic.

For a split second it seemed as if the eagle had smashed to pieces, but it was the mosaic which had shattered, revealing beneath it a large aperture reaching down into the earth, through which the eagle, and Ezio, fell. He was caught immediately on a chute which sloped at an angle of some 45 degrees into the ground. He slid down it feet first, steering himself with his arms, hearing the stone eagle thundering its way ahead of him, until, with a mighty splash, it tumbled into a large subterranean pool. Ezio followed.

When he surfaced, he could see that the pool was in the middle of a great antechamber of some kind. An antechamber, because its architectural focus was a door. A door of dark green stone, polished smooth by time.

Ezio was not alone. A party of five Templars on the granite embankment of the lake near the door had turned at the sight and sound of the crashing intrusion, and were waiting for him, yelling, swords at the ready. With them was a man in workmen's clothes, a dusty canvas apron wrapped round his waist and a leather tool bag on his belt. A stonemason, by the look of him. A hammer and a large stone-chisel hung in his hands as he watched, mouth agape.

Ezio hauled himself up onto the embankment as Templar guards hurried forward to rain blows down on him, but he fended them off for long enough to get to his feet. Then he braced himself and faced them.

He again sensed their fear, and took advantage of their momentary hesitation to attack first. He drew his scimitar firmly with his right hand, and unleashed the hidden blade beneath his left. In two swift strokes to right and left, he brought the nearest men down. The others circled, just out of reach, taking turns to make sudden stabs at him, like striking vipers, hoping to disorient him. But their efforts weren't sufficiently concerted. Ezio managed to drive his shoulder against one, pitching him into the pool. He sank almost immediately, its black waters cutting off his anguished cry for help. Swinging round and keeping low, Ezio hurled a fourth man over his back onto the granite. His helmet flew off and his skull cracked with a noise like a gunshot on the diamond-hard stone.

The surviving fifth man, a Templar corporal, barked a desperate order to the workman, but the workman did nothing, too petrified to move. Then, seeing Ezio turn on him, the corporal backed away, his mouth slavering, until the wall behind him arrested his retreat. Ezio approached, intending merely to knock the Templar unconscious. The corporal, who'd be waiting for his moment, struck a treacherous dagger-blow towards Ezio's groin. Ezio sidestepped and seized the man by the shoulder, near the throat.

'I would have spared you, friend. But you give me no choice.' With one swift stroke of his razor-sharp scimitar, Ezio severed the man's head from his body. '*Requiescat in Pace*,' he said, softly.

Then he turned to the stonemason.

13

The man was about Ezio's age, but running to fat and not in the greatest shape. At the moment he was trembling like an outsize aspen.

'Don't kill me, sir!' the man pleaded, cowering. 'I'm a working man, that's all. Just some poor nobody with a family to look after.'

'Got a name?'

'Adad, sir.'

'What kind of work is it you do for these people?' Ezio stooped to wipe his blades on the tunic of the dead corporal and sheathed them. Adad relaxed a fraction. He was still holding his hammer and chisel, and Ezio had kept a careful eye on them, but the stonemason seemed to have forgotten they were in his hands.

'Digging, mostly. Wretched hard work it is too, sir. It's taken me a year just to find this chamber alone.' Adad scanned Ezio's face, but if he'd been looking for sympathy he hadn't found it. After a moment's silence, he went on, 'For the past three months I've been trying to break through this door.'

Ezio turned away from the man and examined the door. 'You haven't made much progress,' he commented.

'I haven't made a dent! This stone is harder than steel.'

Ezio ran a hand across the glass-smooth stone. The seriousness of his expression deepened. 'I doubt if you ever will. This door guards objects more valuable than all the gold in the world.'

Now that the menace of death was past, the man's eyes gleamed involuntarily. 'Ah! Do you mean – gemstones?'

Ezio regarded him mockingly. Then he turned his gaze to the door, and examined it closely. 'There are keyholes here. Five of them. Where are the keys?'

'They tell me little. But I know the Templars found one beneath the Ottoman sultan's palace. As for the others, I suppose their little book will tell them.'

Ezio looked at him sharply. 'Sultan Bayezid's palace? And what is this book?'

The mason shrugged. 'A journal of some kind, I think. That ugly captain, the one with the scarred face, carries it with him wherever he goes.'

Ezio’s eyes narrowed. He thought fast. Then he appeared to relax and, taking a small linen pouch from his tunic, tossed it to Adad. It jingled as the man caught it.

‘Go home,’ said Ezio. ‘Find other work – with honest men.’

Adad looked pleased, then doubtful. ‘You don’t know how much I’d like to. I’d love to leave this place. But these men – they will murder me if I try.’

Ezio turned slightly, peering back up the chute behind him. A thin ray of light came down it.

He turned back to the mason. ‘Pack your tools,’ he said. ‘You will have nothing to fear now.’

14

Sticking to the less-frequented stairways and corridors of the castle, Ezio regained the high battlements unseen, his breath pluming in the cold air. He made his way round them to a point which overlooked the village of Masyaf, crouching in the castle's shadow. He knew there would be no way of leaving the castle by either of its heavily guarded gates, but he had to track down the scarred, shaven-headed captain. He guessed the man would be outside, supervising the search for the escaped Assassin. Templars would be scouring the countryside around, which explained the relative absence of men within the confines of the fortress. In any case, Ezio knew that the next step in his mission lay beyond Masyaf's walls, but first he had to leave the place.

Once he had a clear view of the village, he could see that Templar guards were making their rounds of it, interrogating its inhabitants. Ensuring the sun was at his back, obscuring any clear view of him from below, he unstrapped his bags and took out the parachute, unfolding it and erecting it with as much speed as care would allow, for his life would depend on it. The distance was too far and the descent too dangerous for even the most daring Leap of Faith.

The parachute took the form of a triangular tent, or pyramid, of strong silk held in place by struts of thin steel. Ezio attached the ropes from each of its four corners to a quick-release harness which he buckled round his chest, then, pausing to gauge the wind, and to ensure that no one below was looking up, hurled himself into the air.

It would have been an exhilarating feeling if he had had the leisure to enjoy it, but he concentrated on guiding the device, using the convection currents and thermals as best he could, imitating an eagle, and brought himself safely to land a dozen yards from the nearest building. Swiftly stowing the parachute, he made his way into the village.

Sure enough, the Templars were busy harassing the villagers, pushing them around and beating them without mercy if they showed the slightest sign of not answering clearly and instantly. Ezio blended in with the people of the village, listening and watching.

One old man was pleading for mercy as a Templar bravo stood over his cowering form. ‘Help me, please!’ he begged anyone who would listen, but no one did.

‘Speak, dog!’ the Templar shouted. ‘Where is he?’

Elsewhere, a younger man was being beaten by two thugs, even as he implored them to stay their hand. Another cried, ‘I am innocent!’ as he was clubbed to the ground.

‘Where is he hiding?’ snarled his assailants.

It wasn’t only the men who were being cruelly handled. Two other Templar cowards held down a woman as a third kicked her mercilessly, stifling her cries as she writhed on the ground, piteously beseeching them to stop, ‘I know nothing! Please forgive me!’

‘Bring us the Assassin, and no further harm will come to you,’ sneered her tormentor, bringing his face close to hers. ‘Otherwise …’

Ezio watched, aching to assist, but forcing himself to concentrate on his search for the captain. He arrived at the front gate of the village just in time to see the object of his search, mounting a horse-drawn wagon. The captain was in such a hurry to be gone that he flung the driver out of his seat, onto the ground.

‘Get out of my way!’ he bellowed. ‘*Fíye apó brostá mou!*’ Seizing the reins, the captain glared around him at his troops. ‘None of you leave until the Assassin is dead,’ he snarled. ‘Do you understand?! Find him!’

He’d been speaking Greek, Ezio registered. Formerly Ezio had mostly heard Italian and Arabic. Could the captain be a Byzantine among this Templar crew? A descendant of those driven into exile when Constantinople fell to the sword of Sultan Mehmed sixty-five years ago? Ezio knew that the exiles had established themselves in the Peloponnese soon afterwards, but, even after they’d been overrun there by the triumphant Ottomans, pockets of them still survived in Asia Minor and the Near East.

He stepped forward, into the open.

The soldiers looked at him nervously.

‘Sir!’ said one of the bolder sergeants. ‘He seems to have found us.’

For reply, the captain seized the whip from its socket by the driver’s seat, and lashed his horses forward, yelling, ‘Go! Go!’ Ezio, seeing this, exploded into a run. Templar troops tried to impede him, but drawing his scimitar he cut his way impatiently through them. Making a dive for the fast-disappearing wagon, he just missed gaining a hold on it, but managed to seize a trailing rope instead. The wagon checked for an instant, then surged forward, dragging Ezio with it.

Painfully, Ezio started to haul himself hand over hand up the rope towards the wagon, while behind him he heard the noise of thundering hooves. A couple of

soldiers had mounted horses themselves, and were hot on his heels, swords raised, striving to get close enough to cut him down. As they rode, they screamed warnings to the captain, who lashed his own horses into an even more furious gallop. Meanwhile another, lighter, wagon had set off in pursuit, and was swiftly drawing level.

Crashing across the rough terrain, Ezio continued to haul himself up the rope. He was within two feet of the wagon's tailgate when the two riders behind him closed in. He ducked his head, waiting for a blow, but the horsemen had been too hasty, concentrating more on their quarry than their riding. Their mounts collided sickeningly inches behind Ezio's heels and fell in a pandemonium of screaming horses, cursing riders and dust.

Straining hard, Ezio forced his aching arms to make one final effort. Breathing heavily, he wrenched, rather than pulled himself the last foot onto the wagon, where he clung for a moment motionless, his head swimming, catching his breath.

Meanwhile, the second wagon had drawn abreast of the first, and the captain was frantically signalling the men aboard to bring it in closer. As soon as they had done so, the captain leapt from his wagon to theirs, pushing its driver from his seat. With a dull cry, the man fell to the ground from the speeding vehicle, hitting a rock and ricocheting off it with an appalling thud, before lying inert, his head twisted round at an unnatural angle.

Gaining control of the plunging horses, the captain raced forward and away. Ezio, in his turn, scrambled to the front of the wagon he was on and seized the reins, his arm muscles yelling in protest as he hauled on them to steady his own team. His two horses, foam flecked and wild eyed, blood gathering at the bits in their mouths, nevertheless kept up their gallop, and Ezio remained in the chase. Seeing this, the captain steered towards an old open gate across the road, supported by crumbling brick columns. He managed to sideswipe one of them without hindering his onward rush, and the column smashed down in a welter of masonry, directly in front of Ezio. Ezio heaved at the reins, drawing his team to the right in the nick of time, and his wagon bumped and crashed off the road into the scrubland at its edge. He struggled to bring his horses round to the left, to regain the beaten track. Dust and small stones flew everywhere, cutting Ezio's cheeks and making him squeeze his eyes into slits to protect them, and keep focused on his quarry.

'Go to hell, damn you!' screeched the captain over his shoulder. And now Ezio could see the soldiers precariously hanging on in the back of the other wagon were preparing grenades to hurl at him. Zigzagging as best he could to avoid the explosions, which went off either side of him and behind him, Ezio

fought hard to keep control of his terrified and, by now, all but stampeding team. But the bombs failed to find their mark, and he kept on track.

The captain tried a different tactic, and a dangerous one.

He suddenly slowed, falling back so that Ezio, before he could make a counter-move, drew level. Immediately, the captain made his team swerve so that his wagon crashed broadside into Ezio's.

Ezio could see the whites of the captain's half-crazed eyes, the scar livid across his strained face, as they glared at each other through the swirling air.

'Die, you bastard!' yelled the captain.

Then he glanced ahead. Ezio followed his gaze and saw, up ahead, a guard tower, and, beyond it, another village. This village was larger than the one at Masyaf, and partially fortified. An outlying Templar stronghold.

The captain managed to coax one more burst of speed from his horses, and as he drew away with a cry of triumph, his men threw two more bombs. This time one of them exploded beneath the left-hand rear wheel of Ezio's wagon. The blast threw it halfway into the air. Ezio was thrown clear while his horses made sounds like banshees and plunged away off into the scrubland, dragging the remains of the ruined wagon behind them. The land fell away sharply to the right of the road, and Ezio was pitched twenty feet down into a gulley where a large outcrop of thorny shrubs broke his fall and hid him.

He lay prone, looking at the grey unforgiving ground inches from his face, unable to move, unable to think, but feeling that every bone in his body had been broken. He closed his eyes and waited for the end.

15

Ezio heard voices, far away, as he lay in a kind of dream. He thought he saw the young man in white again, but he couldn't be sure. Who had neither helped nor hindered him, but who seemed to be on his side. Others came and went: his long-dead brothers, Federico and Petruccio; Claudia; his father and mother; and – unbidden and unwanted – the beautiful, cruel face of Caterina Sforza.

The visions faded, but the voices remained, stronger now, as his other senses returned to him. He tasted soil in his mouth and smelled the earth against which his cheek lay. The aches and pains in his body returned too. He thought he'd never be able to move again.

The voices were indistinct, coming from above. He imagined the Templars were leaning over the edge of the little cliff he'd fallen down, but realized they couldn't see him. The thick shrubs must be concealing his body. As he'd vanished from their sight, the Templars organized a search party. Later, to the captain's fury, it returned with nothing conclusive to report.

He waited a while, until the voices finally receded and silence fell. Then, tentatively, he flexed his hands and feet, then his arms and legs, as, gratefully, he spat out the dirt. Nothing seemed to be broken. Slowly, painfully, he wormed his way out of the bushes and got to his feet. Then, cautiously, and keeping to what cover there was, he clambered back to the road.

He was just in time to see the Templar captain passing through the gate in the walls of the fortified village a couple of hundred yards away. Keeping to the side of the road where bushes grew and he could conceal himself, he brushed himself off and started to walk towards the village, but it seemed as if every muscle in him protested.

'This used to be so easy,' he murmured to himself, ruefully. But he willed himself onwards and, skirting the wall, found a likely place to climb it.

Having stuck his head over the parapet to check that he was unobserved, he pulled himself over and dropped into the village. He found himself in the stockyard, empty except for a pair of heifers which shunted off to one side, eyeing him warily. He took time to wait, in case there were dogs, but after a minute, he passed through the wicket gate of the stockyard and, following the

sound of raised voices, made his way through the apparently deserted village towards them. Nearing the village square, he caught sight of the captain, and stepped out of sight behind a shed. The captain, standing on the top of a low tower at one corner of the square, was berating two unhappy sergeants. Beyond them the assembled villagers stood mutely by. The captain's words were punctuated by the chop-chop of a waterwheel on the other side, worked by the rivulet which ran through the village.

'I seem to be the only one around here who knows how to handle a horse,' the captain was saying. 'Until we're *sure* he's *dead* this time, I command you not to drop your guard for a moment. Do you understand?'

'Yessir,' the men answered sullenly.

'How many times have you failed to kill that man, hmn?' the captain continued angrily. 'Listen up and listen close: if I do not see his head rolling in the dust at my feet within the hour, yours will take its place!'

The captain fell silent and, turning, watched the road from his vantage point. Ezio could see that he was jittery. He fiddled with the cocking lever of his crossbow.

Ezio had made his way into the crowd of villagers during the captain's tirade, blending in with them as best he could, which, given his battered and downtrodden appearance, wasn't difficult. But the crowd was breaking up now, returning to work. The mood among the people was nervous, and when a man in front of him suddenly stumbled, jostling another, the second turned on him irritably, snapping, 'Hey, get out of my way – get a move on!'

His attention caught by the disturbance, the captain scanned the crowd, and in an instant his eye caught Ezio's.

'*You!*' he shouted. In another moment he had cocked his bow, fitted a bolt and fired.

Ezio dodged it adroitly, and it flew past him, to embed itself in the arm of the man who'd snapped.

'*Aiëë!*' he yelped, clutching his shattered bicep.

Ezio darted for cover as the captain reloaded.

'You will not leave this place alive!' the captain bawled, firing again. This time, the bolt stuck harmlessly in a wooden doorframe, which Ezio had ducked behind. But there was very little wrong with the captain's shooting. So far, Ezio had been lucky. He had to get away, and fast. Two more bolts sang past him.

'There's no way out!' the captain called after him. 'You may as well turn and face me, you pitiful old dog.' He fired again.

Ezio drew a breath and leapt to catch hold of the lintel of another doorway, swinging himself up so that he was able to get onto the flat clay roof of a

dwelling. He ran across it to the other side as another bolt whistled past his ear.

‘Stand your ground and die,’ hollered the captain. ‘Your time has come, and you must accept it, even if it is far away from your wretched kennel in Rome! So come and meet your killer!’

Ezio could see where soldiers were running round to the back of the village, to cut off his line of retreat. But they had left the captain isolated, except for his two sergeants, and his quiver of bolts was empty.

The villagers had scattered and disappeared long since.

Ezio ducked behind the low wall surrounding the roof, unstrapped his bags from his back, and slipped the pistol harness onto his right wrist.

‘Why will you not quit?!’ the captain was calling, drawing his sword.

Ezio stood. ‘I never learned how,’ he called back in a clear voice, raising his gun.

The captain looked at the raised weapon in momentary panic and fear, then shrieking, ‘Out of my way!’ at his attendants, he shoved them aside and leapt from the tower to the ground. Ezio fired and caught him in mid-jump, the bullet hitting him in the left knee. With a howl of pain, the captain dropped to the ground, dashing his head against a sharp stone, and rolled over there. The sergeants fled.

Ezio crossed the deserted square. No soldiers came back. Either their fear of Ezio had persuaded them by now that he was indeed a supernatural being, or their love of their captain could not have been very great. There was silence except for the steady clatter of the waterwheel, and the captain’s agonized whimpering.

The captain caught Ezio’s eye as he approached. ‘Ah, dammit,’ he said. ‘Well, what are you waiting for? Go on – kill me!’

‘You have something I need,’ Ezio told him calmly, reloading his gun so that both chambers were ready. The captain eyed the weapon.

‘I see the old hound still has his bite,’ he said, through gritted teeth. Blood flowed from his knee and from the more serious wound on his left temple.

‘The book you carry. Where is it?’

The captain looked crafty. ‘Niccolò Polo’s old journal, you mean? You know about that? You surprise me, Assassin.’

‘I am full of surprises,’ Ezio replied. ‘Give it to me.’

Seeing there was no help for it, the captain, grunting, drew an old leather-bound book, some twelve inches by six, from his jerkin. His hand was shaking, and he dropped it onto the ground. The captain looked at it, with a laugh that died, gurgling, in his throat. ‘Take it,’ he said. ‘We have gleaned all its secrets,

and found the first of the five keys already. When we have the rest, the Grand Temple and all the power within will be ours.'

Ezio looked at him pityingly. 'You are deceived, soldier. There is no ancient temple at Masyaf. Only a library, full of wisdom.'

The captain looked at him. 'Your forebear Altaïr had the Apple of Eden in his control for sixty years, Ezio. He gained much more than what you call wisdom. He learned … *everything*!'

Ezio thought about that fleetingly. He knew the Apple was safely buried in a church crypt in Rome – he and Machiavelli had seen to that. But his attention was drawn back immediately by a sharp gasp of pain from the captain. Blood had been streaming from his untended wounds all the time they had been speaking. Now the man had the death pallor on him. A curiously peaceful expression came over his face, and he lay back as a huge long, last sighing breath escaped him.

Ezio watched him for a moment. 'You were a real *bastardo*,' he said. 'But – for all that – *Requiescat in Pace*.'

He leant forward and gently closed the man's eyes with his gloved hand.

The waterwheel hammered on. Otherwise, there was silence.

Ezio picked up the book and turned it over in his hands. On its cover, he saw an embossed symbol, its gilding long since faded. The emblem of the Assassin Brotherhood. Smiling slightly, he opened it to the title page.

LA CROCIATA SEGRETA
Niccolò Polo
MASYAF, giugno, MCCLVII
COSTANTINOPOLI, gennaio, MCCLVIII

As he read, Ezio drew in a breath.

Constantinople, he thought. *Of course* …

16

The breeze freshened, and Ezio looked up from Niccolò Polo's book, open on his lap, as he sat under an awning on the afterdeck of the large broad-bellied baghlah while it cut through the clear blue water of the White Sea, both lateens and jib set to take full advantage of a favourable wind.

The long journey from Latakia on the Syrian coast had first brought him back to Cyprus. The next port of call had been Rhodes – where his attention had been caught by the arrival on board of a new passenger, a beautiful woman of perhaps thirty wearing a green dress which perfectly accorded with her copper-gold hair. Then on through the Dodecanese north towards the Dardanelles and, at last, the Sea of Marmara.

Now the voyage was drawing towards its close. Sailors called to each other as passengers lined up along the gunwale to watch as, a mile distant, glittering in the sharp sunlight, the great city of Constantinople rose on the port bow. Ezio tried to identify parts of the city from the map he had bought in the Syrian port before embarkation. Near him stood an expensively dressed young man, probably still in his teens, an Ottoman, but also clearly familiar with the city, with whom he'd struck up a nodding acquaintance. The young man was busy with a mariner's astrolabe, taking measurements and making notes in an ivory-bound copybook, which hung on a silk cord from his belt.

'Where's that?' Ezio asked, pointing. He wanted to have as much knowledge of the place as possible before landing. News of his escape from the Templars at Masyaf would not be far behind him, and he'd need to work fast.

'That's the Bayezid Quarter. The big mosque you can see was built by the Sultan about five years ago. And just beyond it you can see the roofs of the Grand Bazaar.'

'Got it,' said Ezio, squinting in the sun to focus and wishing that Leonardo had got around to making that instrument he was always talking about – a kind of extendable tube with lenses – which would make distant things seem closer.

'Watch your sleeve-purse when you go to the Bazaar,' advised the young man. 'You get a pretty mixed bag of people there.'

'Like in any *souk*.'

‘*Evet*.’ The young man smiled. ‘Just over there, where the towers are, is the Imperial District. That grey dome you can see is the old church of Hagia Sofia. It’s a mosque now, of course. And beyond it, you see that long low yellow building – more of a complex of buildings, really – with two low domes close together and a spire? That’s Topkapi Sarayi. One of the first buildings we erected after the conquest, and we’re still working on it.’

‘Is Sultan Bayezid in residence?’

The young man’s face darkened slightly. ‘He should be – but no – he is not. Not at the moment.’

‘I must visit it.’

‘You’d better make sure you have an invitation first!’

The breeze slackened and the sails rippled. The sailors furled the jib. The master brought the ship’s head round slightly, bringing another aspect of the city into view.

‘You see that mosque there?’ the young man continued, as if anxious to take the conversation away from Topkapi Palace. ‘That’s the Fatih Camii – the first thing Sultan Mehmed had built to celebrate his victory over the Byzantines. Not that there was much of them left by the time he got here. Their empire was already long dead. But he wanted his mosque to surpass Hagia Sofia. As you can see, he didn’t quite make it.’

‘Not for want of trying,’ said Ezio diplomatically, as his eyes scanned the magnificent building.

‘Mehmed was piqued,’ the young man continued. ‘The story goes that he had the architect’s arm cut off as a punishment. But of course that’s just a legend. Sinan was far too good an architect for Mehmed to want to damage him.’

‘You said the Sultan was not in residence,’ Ezio prompted, gently.

‘Bayezid? No.’ The young man’s troubled look returned. ‘A great man, the Sultan, though the fire of his youth has been replaced by quietness and piety. But, alas, he is at odds with one of his sons – Selim – and that has meant a war between them which has been simmering for years now.’

The baghlah was sailing along under the southern walls of the city now, and soon rounded the corner north into the Bosphorus. Shortly afterwards a great inlet opened out on the port side, and the ship steered into it, over the great chain which hung across its mouth. It was lowered now, but could be raised to close the harbour in times of emergency or war.

‘The chain has been in disuse since the conquest,’ the young man observed. ‘After all, it did not stop Mehmed.’

‘But a useful safety measure,’ Ezio replied.

‘We call this the Haliç,’ said the young man. ‘The Golden Horn. And there on the north side is the Galata Tower. Your Genoese countrymen built it about 150 years ago. Mind you, they called it the Christea Turris. But they would, wouldn’t they? Are you from Genoa yourself?’

‘I’m a Florentine.’

‘Ah well, can’t be helped.’

‘It’s a good city.’

‘*Affedersiniz*. I am not familiar enough with your part of the world. Though many of your countrymen live here still. There’ve been Italians here for centuries. Your famous Marco Polo – his father, Niccolò, was trading here well over 200 years ago, with his brother.’ The young man smiled, watching Ezio’s face. Then he turned his attention back to the Galata Tower. ‘There might be a way of getting you to the top. The security people might be persuaded. You get the most breathtaking view of the city from there.’

‘That would be – most rewarding.’

The young man looked at him. ‘You’ve probably heard of another famous countryman of yours, still living, I believe. Leonardo da Vinci?’

‘The name stirs some memories.’

‘Less than a decade ago, *Sayin* da Vinci *bey* was asked by our Sultan to build a bridge across the Horn.’

Ezio smiled, remembering that Leonardo had once mentioned it to him in passing. He could imagine his friend’s enthusiasm for such a project. ‘What became of it?’ he asked. ‘I see no bridge here now.’

The young man spread his hands. ‘I’m told the design was beautiful, but unfortunately, the plan never came to pass. Too ambitious, the Sultan felt at last.’

‘Non mi sorprende,’ Ezio said, half to himself. Then he pointed to another tower. ‘Is that a lighthouse?’

The young man followed his gaze towards a small islet aft of them. ‘Yes. A very old one. Eleven centuries or more. It’s called the Kiz Kulesi – how’s your Turkish?’

‘Weak.’

‘Then I’ll translate. You’d call it the Maiden Tower. We called it after the daughter of a sultan who died there of a snake bite.’

‘Why was she living in a lighthouse?’

The young man smiled. ‘The plan was, to avoid snakes,’ he said. ‘Look, now you can see the Aqueduct of Valens. See that double row of arches? Those Romans certainly could build. I used to love climbing it, as a child.’

‘Quite a climb.’

‘You almost look as if you’d like to try it!’

Ezio smiled. ‘You never know,’ he said.

The young man opened his mouth to say something, but changed his mind and shut it again. His expression as he looked at Ezio was not unkind. And Ezio knew exactly what he was thinking: an old man trying to escape the years.

‘Where have you come from?’ asked Ezio.

The young man looked dismissive. ‘Oh – the Holy Land,’ he said. ‘That is, *our* Holy Land. Mecca and Medina. Every good Muslim’s supposed to make the trip once in his lifetime.’

‘You’ve got it over with early.’

‘You could say that.’

They watched the city pass by in silence as they rode up the Horn to their anchorage. ‘There isn’t a city in Europe with a skyline like this,’ Ezio said.

‘Ah, but this side *is* in Europe,’ replied the young man. ‘Over there,’ he gestured east across the Bosphorus, ‘*that* side’s Asia.’

‘There are some borders even the Ottomans cannot move,’ Ezio observed.

‘Very few,’ the young man replied quickly, and Ezio thought he sounded defensive. Then he changed the subject. ‘You say you’re an Italian – from Florence,’ he went on. ‘But your clothes belie that. And – forgive me – you look as if you’ve been in them rather a long time. Have you been travelling long?’

‘*Sì, da molto tempo*. I left *Roma* twelve months ago, looking for … inspiration. And that search has brought me here.’

The young man glanced at the book in Ezio’s hand, but said nothing. Ezio himself didn’t want to reveal more of his purpose. He leant on the rail and looked at the city walls, and the other ships from all the countries in the world crowded at moorings as their baghlah slowly passed them.

‘When I was a child, my father told me stories of the fall of Constantinople,’ Ezio said at last. ‘It happened six years before I was born.’

The young man carefully packed his astrolabe into a leather box slung from a belt round his shoulder. ‘We call the city Kostantiniyye.’

‘Doesn’t it amount to the same thing?’

‘We run it now. But you’re right. Kostantiniyye, Byzantium, Nea Roma, the Red Apple – what real difference does it make? They say Mehmed wanted to re-christen it Islam-bul – Where Islam Flourishes – but that derivation’s just another legend. Still, people are even using that name. Though of course the educated among us know that it should be Istan-bol – To the City.’ The young man paused. ‘What stories did your father tell? Brave Christians being beaten down by wicked Turks?’

‘No. Not at all.’

The young man sighed. ‘I suppose the moral of any story matches the temper of the man who tells it.’

Ezio pulled himself erect. Most of his muscles had recovered during the long voyage, but there was still an ache in his side. ‘That we can agree on,’ he said.

The young man smiled warmly and genuinely. ‘*Güzel!* I am glad! Kostantiniyye is a city for all kinds and all creeds. Even the Byzantines who remain. And students like me, or … travellers like you.’

Their conversation was interrupted by a young married Seljuk couple, who were walking along the deck past them. Ezio and the young man paused to eavesdrop on their conversation – Ezio, because any information he could glean about the city would be of interest to him.

‘My father cannot cope with all this crime,’ the husband was saying. ‘He’ll have to shut up shop if it gets any worse.’

‘It will pass,’ his wife replied. ‘Maybe when the Sultan returns.’

‘Hah!’ rejoined the man sarcastically. ‘Bayezid is weak. He turns a blind eye to the Byzantine upstarts, and look what the result is – *kargasha*!’

His wife shushed him. ‘You should not say such things!’

‘Why not? I tell only the truth. My father is an honest man, and thieves are robbing him blind.’

Ezio interrupted them. ‘Excuse me – I couldn’t help overhearing.’

The man’s wife shot her husband a look: *you see*?

But the man turned to Ezio and addressed him, ‘*Affedersiniz, efendim*. I can see you are a traveller. If you are staying in the city, please visit my father’s shop. His carpets are the best in all the empire, and he will give you a good price.’ He paused. ‘My father is a good man, but thieves have all but destroyed his business.’

The husband would have said more, but his wife hastily dragged him away.

Ezio exchanged a look with his companion, who had just accepted a glass of *sharbat* brought to him by what looked like a valet. He raised his glass. ‘Would you care for one? It’s very refreshing and it will be a while yet before we dock.’

‘That would be excellent.’

The young man nodded at his servant, who withdrew.

A group of Ottoman soldiers passed by, on their way home from a tour of duty in the Dodecanese, talking of the city they were returning to. Ezio nodded to them, and joined them for a moment, while the young man turned his face away and stood aloof, making notes in his little ivory-bound book.

‘What I want to know is, what are these Byzantine thugs holding out for?’ one of the soldiers asked. ‘They had their chance once. They nearly destroyed this city.’

‘When Sultan Mehmed rode in, there were fewer than 40,000 people living here – and living in squalor,’ put in another.

‘*Aynen oyle*,’ said a third. ‘Exactly so! And now look at the city. 300,000 inhabitants, and flourishing again for the first time in centuries. We have done our part.’

‘We made this city strong again. We rebuilt it!’ said the second soldier.

‘Yes, but the Byzantines don’t see it that way,’ rejoined the first. ‘They just cause trouble, every chance they get.’

‘How may I recognize them?’ Ezio asked.

‘Just stay clear of any mercenaries you see wearing a rough reddish garb,’ said the first soldier. ‘They are Byzantines. And they do not play nice.’

The soldiers moved off then, called by an NCO to ready themselves for disembarking. Ezio’s young man was standing at his elbow. At the same moment, his valet reappeared with Ezio’s *sharbat*.

‘So you see,’ said the young man. ‘For all its beauty, Kostantiniyye is not, after all, the most perfect place in the world.’

‘Is anywhere?’ Ezio replied.

17

Their ship had docked, and passengers and crew scrambled about, getting in each other's way, as mooring ropes were thrown to men on the quayside and gangplanks were lowered.

Ezio had returned to his cabin to collect his saddlebags – all that he carried. He'd know how to get what he needed once he was ashore. His young companion's servant had arranged three leather-bound trunks on the deck, and they awaited porters to carry them ashore. Ezio and his new friend prepared to take leave of one another.

The young man sighed. 'I have so much work to return to – and yet it is good to be home.'

'You are far too young to be worried about work, *ragazzo*!'

His eye was distracted by the appearance of the redheaded woman in green. She was fussing over a large parcel, which looked heavy. The young man followed his gaze.

'When I was your age, my interests were … were mainly …' Ezio trailed off, watching the woman. Watching the way she moved in her dress. She looked up and he thought he'd caught her eye. '*Salve!*' he said.

But she hadn't noticed him after all, and Ezio turned back to his companion, who'd been watching him with amusement.

'Incredible,' said the young man. 'I'm surprised you got anything done at all.'

'So was my mother.' Ezio smiled back, a little ruefully.

Finally the gates in the gunwale were opened and the waiting crowd of passengers surged forward.

'It was a pleasure to have made your acquaintance, *beyfendi*,' said the young man, bowing to Ezio. 'I hope you will find something to hold your interest while you are here.'

'I have faith that I will.'

The young man moved away but Ezio lingered, watching the woman struggling to lift the parcel – which she was unwilling to entrust to any porter – as she started to disembark. He was about to step forward to assist when he saw that the young man had beaten him to it.

‘May I be of some assistance, my lady?’ he asked her.

The woman looked at the young man and smiled. Ezio thought that smile was more killing than any crossbow bolt. But it wasn’t aimed at him. ‘Thank you, dear boy,’ she said, and the young man, waving his valet aside, personally hefted the package onto his shoulder, following her down the companionway to the quay.

‘A scholar *and* a gentleman,’ Ezio called to him. ‘You are full of surprises.’

The young man turned back and smiled again. ‘Very few, my friend. Very few.’ He raised a hand. ‘*Allaha ismarladik!* May God bless you!’

Ezio watched as the woman followed by the young man were swallowed up by the crowd. He noticed a man standing slightly apart, looking at him. A tough man in his mid-thirties, in a white surcoat with a red sash and dark trousers tucked into yellow boots. He had long dark hair and beard and four throwing knives in a scabbard attached high on his left shoulder. He also wore a scimitar, and his right forearm carried a triple-plated steel guard. As Ezio tensed and looked more closely he thought, but was not sure, that he could detect the harness of a hidden blade just beneath the man’s right hand. The surcoat was hooded, but the hood was down and the man’s unruly hair was kept in check by a broad yellow bandana.

Ezio moved slowly down the gangplank to the quay. And the man approached. When they were within two paces of each other, the man stopped, smiled cautiously and bowed deeply.

‘Welcome, Brother! Unless the legend is a lie, you are the man I have always longed to meet. Renowned Master and Mentor – Ezio Auditore da—’ he broke off and his dignity deserted him. ‘Lah, lah-lah!’ he finished.

‘*Prego*?’ Ezio was amused.

‘Forgive me, I have a hard time getting my tongue round Italian.’

‘I am Ezio da Firenze. The city of my birth.’

‘Which would make me … Yusuf Tazim *da* Istanbul! I like that!’

‘Istanbul. Ah – so that is what *you* call this city.’

‘It’s a favourite with the locals. Come sir – let me take your pack.’

‘No, thank you.’

‘As you wish. Welcome, Mentor! I am glad you have arrived at last. I will show you the city.’

‘How did you know to expect me?’

‘Your sister wrote from Rome to alert the Brotherhood here. And we had word of your exploits from a spy in place at Masyaf. So we have watched the docks for weeks in the hope and expectation of your arrival.’ Yusuf could see that Ezio remained suspicious. He looked quizzical. ‘Your sister, *Claudia*, wrote – you

see? I know her name. And I can show you the letter. I have it with me. I knew you would not be a man to take anything at its face value.'

'I see you wear a hidden blade.'

'Who else but a member of the Brotherhood would have access to one?'

Ezio relaxed, slightly. Yusuf's demeanour was suddenly solemn. 'Come.'

He put a hand on Ezio's shoulder and guided him through the teeming throng. Each side of the crowded lanes he led him down was filled with stalls selling all manner of goods under a kaleidoscope of coloured awnings, and also filled, it seemed, with people of every nation and race on earth. Christians, Jews and Muslims were busy bartering with each other, Turkish street-cries mingled with others in Greek, Frankish and Arabic. As for Italian, Ezio had recognized the accents of Venice, Genoa and Florence before he'd walked one block. And there were other languages he half-recognized or could only guess at – Armenian, Bulgarian, Serbian and Persian. And a guttural language spoken by tall, fair-skinned men, who wore their red hair and beards wild and long, which he did not recognize at all.

'Welcome to the Galata District.' Yusuf beamed. 'For centuries, it has been a home to orphans from Europe and Asia alike. You won't find more diversity anywhere else in the city. And for that very good reason, we Assassins have our headquarters here.'

'Show me.'

Yusuf nodded eagerly. '*Kesinlikle*, Mentor. At once! The Brotherhood here is impatient to meet the man who put the Borgia out to grass!' He laughed.

'Does everyone in the city already know I'm here?'

'I sent a boy ahead as soon as I spotted you. And in any case, your Holy Land tussle with the Templars did not go unnoticed. We didn't need our spy for that!'

Ezio looked reflective. 'When I first set out, violence was far from my mind. I sought merely wisdom.' He looked at his new lieutenant. 'The contents of Altaïr's library.'

Yusuf laughed again, though less certainly. 'Not realizing that it's been sealed shut for two and a half centuries?'

Ezio laughed a little himself. 'No. I assumed as much. But I admit that I never expected to find Templars guarding it.'

Yusuf now became serious. They were reaching less populous streets, and they relaxed their pace. 'It is very troubling. Five years ago Templar influence here was minimal. Just a small faction with dreams of restoring the throne to Byzantium.'

They'd reached a small square, and Yusuf drew Ezio to one side to point out a knot of four men crowded in a dark corner. They were dressed in dull grey

armour over rough red woollen tunics and jerkins.

‘There’s a group of them now,’ Yusuf said, lowering his voice. ‘Don’t look in their direction.’ He glanced around. ‘They’re growing in number, day by day. And they know what we all know, that Sultan Bayezid is on his way out. They’re watching, waiting for their moment. I believe they may try something dramatic.’

‘But is there no heir to the Ottoman throne?’ Ezio asked, surprised.

‘That’s the trouble – there are two of them. Two angry sons. It’s a familiar pattern with these royals. When the Sultan coughs, the princes draw their swords.’

Ezio pondered this, remembering what the young man on the ship had told him. ‘Between the Templars and the Ottomans, you must be kept busy,’ he said.

‘Ezio, *efendim*, I tell you in truth that I barely have time to polish my blade!’

Just then, a shot rang out, and a bullet embedded itself in the wall inches to the left of Yusuf’s head.

18

Yusuf dived behind a row of spice barrels with Ezio close behind him.

‘Talk of the devil and there he is!’ Yusuf said, tight-lipped, as he raised his head just enough to see the gunman reloading across the square.

‘Looks like our Byzantine friends over there didn’t take kindly to being stared at.’

‘I’ll take care of the man with the musket,’ said Yusuf, measuring the distance between himself and his target as he reached back and plucked one of his throwing knives from the scabbard at his back. In a clean movement he threw it and it hurtled across the square, rotating three times before it found its mark, burying itself deep in the man’s throat, just as he raised his gun to fire again. Meanwhile his friends were already sprinting towards them, swords drawn.

‘Nowhere to run,’ said Ezio, drawing his own scimitar.

‘Baptism of fire for you,’ said Yusuf. ‘And you’ve only just arrived. *Çok üzüldüm*.’

‘Don’t think about it,’ replied Ezio, amused. He’d picked up just enough Turkish to know that his companion-in-arms was saying sorry.

Yusuf drew his own sword, and together they leapt from their hiding place to confront the oncoming foe. They were more lightly clad than their three opponents, which left them worse protected but more mobile. Ezio quickly realized, as he joined with the first Byzantine, that he was up against a highly trained fighter.

Yusuf kept up his banter as they fought. But then he was used to this enemy, and a good fifteen years Ezio’s junior. ‘The whole city stirs to welcome you – first the regents, like me – and now the rats!’

Ezio concentrated on the swordplay. It went against him badly at first, but he had quickly attuned himself to the light, flexible sword he was using, and found its curved blade improved swing incredibly. Once or twice, Yusuf, keeping an eye on his Mentor, shouted helpful instructions but ended up casting him an admiring sidelong glance.

‘*Inanilmaz!* A master at work!’

But he'd allowed his attention to be distracted for a second too long, and one of the Byzantines was able to slice through the material of his left sleeve and gash his forearm. As he fell back involuntarily and his assailant pressed his advantage, Ezio shoved his own opponent violently aside and went to his friend's aid, getting between Yusuf and the Byzantine and warding off what would have been a fatal follow-up blow with his left arm bracer. This move wrong-footed the Byzantine just long enough for Yusuf to regain his balance and, in turn, fend off another mercenary who was closing in on Ezio's back, dealing him a mortal blow at the same time as Ezio finished off the second man. The last remaining Byzantine, a big man with a jaw like a rock face, looked doubtful for the first time.

'*Tesekkür ederim*,' said Yusuf, breathing heavily.

'*Bir sey degil*.'

'Is there no end to your talents?'

'Well, at least I learned "thank you" and "you're welcome" on board that baghlah.'

'Look out!'

The huge Byzantine was bearing down on them, roaring, a big sword in one hand and a mace in the other.

'By Allah, I thought he'd run away,' said Yusuf, sidestepping and tripping him up, so that, carried by the weight of his own momentum, he careered forward and crashed heavily into one of the spice barrels, falling headlong into a fragrant heap of yellow powder where he lay immobile.

Ezio, after looking around, wiped his sword clean and sheathed it. Yusuf followed suit.

'You have a curious technique, Mentor. All feint and no fight. It seems. But when you strike …'

'I think like a mongoose – my enemy is the cobra.'

'Striking expression.'

'I try.'

Yusuf glanced around again. 'We'd better go. I think that's enough fun for one day.'

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when another squad of Byzantine mercenaries, attracted by the sound of the fight, came boiling into the square.

Ezio was instantly on the alert, whipping his sword out again.

But then the other side of the square filled with more troops, wearing a different uniform – blue tunics and dark conical felt hats.

'Hang on – wait!' Yusuf cried as the new arrivals turned to attack the mercenaries, quickly causing them to retreat and pursuing them out of sight, out

of the square.

‘They were regular Ottoman troops,’ Yusuf said in response to Ezio’s questioning look. ‘Not Janissaries – they are the elite regiment; you’ll know them when you see them. But all Ottoman soldiers have a special loathing for these Byzantine thugs, and that is to the advantage of the Assassins.’

‘How big an advantage?’

Yusuf spread his hands. ‘Oh, just a little one. They’ll still kill you if you look at them in a way they don’t like, same as the Byzantines. The difference is the Ottomans will feel bad about it afterwards.’

‘How touching.’

Yusuf grinned. ‘It’s not so bad, really. For the first time in many decades, we Assassins have a strong presence here. It wasn’t always that way. Under the Byzantine emperors, we were hunted down and killed on the spot.’

‘You’d better tell me about that,’ said Ezio as they set off once again towards the Brotherhood’s headquarters.

Yusuf scratched his chin. ‘Well, the old emperor, Constantine – the eleventh with that name – only had a three-year reign. Our Sultan Mehmed saw to that. But by all accounts Constantine wasn’t too bad. He was the very last Roman emperor, in a line that went back a millennium.’

‘Spare me the history lesson,’ Ezio interrupted. ‘I want to know what we’re up against now.’

‘Thing is, by the time Mehmed took this city there was almost nothing left of it – or of the old Byzantine empire. They even say Constantine was so broke he had to replace the jewels in his robes with glass copies.’

‘My heart bleeds for him.’

‘He was a brave man. He refused the offer of his life in exchange for surrendering the city, and he went down fighting. But his spirit wasn’t shared by two of his nephews. One of them has been dead a few years now, but the other …’ Yusuf trailed off, thoughtfully.

‘He’s against us?’

‘Oh, you can bet on that. And he’s against the Ottomans. Well, the rulers, anyway.’

‘Where is he now?’

Yusuf looked vague. ‘Who knows? In exile somewhere? But if he’s still alive, he’ll be plotting something.’ He paused. ‘They say he was in pretty thick with Rodrigo Borgia at one time.’

Ezio stiffened at the name. ‘The Spaniard?’

‘The very same. The one you finally snuffed out.’

‘It was his own son who did the deed.’

‘Well, they never were exactly the Holy Family, were they?’

‘Go on.’

‘Rodrigo was also close to a Seljuk called Cem. It was all very hush-hush, and even we Assassins didn’t know about it until much later.’

Ezio nodded. He had heard the stories. ‘If I remember rightly, Cem was a bit of an adventurer.’

‘He was one of the present Sultan’s brothers, but he had his eye on the throne for himself, so Bayezid threw him out. He ended up kind of under house arrest in Italy, and he and Rodrigo became friends.’

‘I remember,’ Ezio said, taking up the story. ‘Rodrigo thought he could use Cem’s ambitions to take Constantinople for himself. But the Brotherhood managed to assassinate Cem in Capua about fifteen years ago. And that put an end to that little plan.’

‘Not that we got much thanks for it.’

‘Our task is not wrought in order to receive thanks.’

Yusuf bowed his head. ‘I am schooled, Mentor. But it was a pretty neat coup, you must admit.’

Ezio was silent, so after a moment Yusuf continued, ‘The two nephews I mentioned were the sons of another of Bayezid’s brothers, Tomas. They’d been exiled too with their father.’

‘Why?’

‘Would you believe it – Tomas was after the Ottoman throne as well. Sound familiar?’

‘The name of this family wouldn’t be *Borgia*, would it?’

Yusuf laughed. ‘It’s *Palaiologus*. But you’re right – it almost amounts to the same thing. After Cem died, the nephews both went to ground in Europe. One stayed there, trying to raise an army to take Constantinople himself – he failed, of course, and died as I said seven or eight years ago without an heir and penniless. But the other – well, he came back, renounced any imperial ambition, was forgiven, and actually joined the navy for a time. Then he seemed to settle down to a life of luxury and womanizing.’

‘But now he’s disappeared?’

‘He’s certainly out of sight.’

‘And we don’t know his name?’

‘He goes by many names – but we have been unable to pin him down.’

‘But he is plotting something.’

‘Yes. And he has Templar connections.’

‘A man to be watched.’

‘If he surfaces, we’ll know about it.’

‘How old is he?’

‘It’s said he was born in the year of Mehmed’s conquest, which would make him just a handful of years older than you.’

‘Still enough kick in him then.’

Yusuf looked at him. ‘If you are anything to go by, plenty.’ He looked around him. Their walk had taken them deep into the heart of the city. ‘We’re almost there,’ he said. ‘This way.’

They made another turning – into a narrow street, dim, cool and shadowy despite the sunshine which tried, and failed, to penetrate the narrow space between the buildings on either side. Yusuf paused at a small unimpressive-looking green-painted door and raised the brass knocker on it. He tapped out a code so softly that Ezio wondered that anyone within would hear. But within seconds the door was swung open by a broad-shouldered narrow-hipped girl who bore the Assassins’ emblem on the buckle of her tunic belt.

Ezio found himself in a spacious courtyard, green vines clinging to the yellow walls. Assembled was a small group of young men and women. They gazed at Ezio in awe as Yusuf, with a theatrical gesture, turned to him and said, ‘Mentor – say hello to your extended family.’

Ezio stepped forward. ‘*Salute a voi, Assassini*. It is an honour to find such fast friends so far from home.’ To his horror, he found that he was moved to tears. Maybe the tensions of the past few hours were catching up with him; and he was still tired after his journey.

Yusuf turned to his fellow members of the Constantinople Chapter of the Assassin Brotherhood. ‘You see, friends? Our Mentor is not afraid to weep openly in front of his pupils.’

Ezio wiped his cheeks with a gloved hand and smiled. ‘Do not worry – I will not make a habit of it.’

‘The Mentor has not been in our city more than a matter of hours and already there is news,’ Yusuf went on, his face serious. ‘We were attacked on the way here. It seems the mercenaries are on the move once more. So’ – he indicated three men and two women – ‘You – Dogan, Kasim, Heyreddin; and you – Evraniki and Irini – I want you to make a sweep of the area now!’

The five silently rose, bowing to Ezio as they took their leave.

‘The rest of you – back to work,’ Yusuf commanded, and the remaining Assassins dispersed.

Left alone, Yusuf turned to Ezio, a look of concern on his face. ‘My Mentor. Your weapons and your armour look in need of renewal – and your clothes – forgive me – are in a pitiful state. We will help you. But we have very little money.’

Ezio smiled. ‘Have no fear. I need none. And I prefer to look after myself. It is time to explore the city alone, to get the feeling of it into my blood.’

‘Will you not rest first? Take some refreshment?’

‘The time for rest is when the task is done.’ Ezio paused. He unslung his bags and withdrew the broken hidden blade. ‘Is there a blacksmith or an armourer skilled and trustworthy enough to repair this?’

Yusuf examined the damage, then slowly, regretfully, shook his head. ‘This, I know, is one of the original blades crafted from Altaïr’s instructions in the Codex your father collected; and what you ask may be impossible to achieve. But if we cannot get it done, we will make sure you do not go out under-armed. Leave your weapons with me – those you do not need to take with you now – and I will have them cleaned and honed. And there will be fresh clothes ready for you on your return.’

‘I am grateful.’ Ezio made for the door. As he approached it, the young blonde doorkeeper lowered her eyes modestly.

‘Azize will be your guide, if you wish her to go with you, Mentor,’ Yusuf suggested.

Ezio turned. ‘No. I go alone.’

19

In truth, Ezio sought to be alone. He needed to collect his thoughts. He went to a taverna in the Genoese quarter, where wine was available, and refreshed himself with a bottle of Pigato and a simple *maccaroin in brodo*. He spent the rest of the afternoon thoroughly acquainting himself with the Galata District and avoided trouble, melting into the crowd whenever he encountered either Ottoman patrols or bands of Byzantine mercenaries. He looked just like many another travel-stained pilgrim wandering the colourful, messy, chaotic, exciting streets of the city.

Once he was satisfied, he returned to headquarters, just as the first lamps were being lit in the dark interiors of the shops, and they were laying tables in the *lokantas*. Yusuf and some of his people were waiting for him.

The Turk immediately came up to him, looking pleased with himself. ‘Praise the heavens, Mentor. I am glad to see you again – and safe. We feared we had lost you to the vices of the big city!’

‘You are melodramatic,’ said Ezio, smiling. ‘And as for vices, I am content with my own, *grazie*.’

‘I hope you will approve of the arrangements we have made in your absence.’

Yusuf led Ezio to an inner chamber, where a complete new outfit had been laid out for him. Next to it, neatly arranged on an oak table, lay his weapons, sharpened, oiled and polished, gleaming as new. A crossbow had been added to the set.

‘We have put the broken blade in a place of safety,’ said Yusuf. ‘But we noticed that you have no hookblade, so we have organized one for you.’

‘Hookblade?’

‘Yes. Look.’ Yusuf drew back his sleeve to reveal what Ezio had first taken to be a hidden blade. But when Yusuf activated it and it sprang forth, he saw that it was a more complex variant. The telescopic blade of the new weapon ended in a curved hook of well-tempered steel.

‘Fascinating,’ said Ezio.

‘You’ve never seen one before? I grew up using these.’

‘Show me.’

Yusuf took a new hookblade from one of the Assassins in attendance, who held it in readiness, and tossed it over to Ezio. Transferring his hidden blade from his right wrist to his left, under the bracer, Ezio strapped the hookblade to his right. He felt its unfamiliar weight, and practised releasing and retracting it. He wished Leonardo had been there to see it.

'You'd better give me a demonstration.'

'Immediately, if you are ready.'

'As I'll ever be.'

'Then follow me, and watch closely what I do.'

They went outside and down the street in the light of late afternoon to a deserted space between a group of tall brick buildings. Yusuf selected one, whose high walls were decorated with projecting horizontal runs of tiled brick at intervals of some ten feet. He set off towards the building at a run, leaping onto a couple of water barrels placed close to it. Springing upwards, he released his hookblade and used it to grip the first projecting run of tiles, pulling himself up with the hookblade and using his momentum to hook onto the run above until he was standing on the roof of the building. The whole operation took less than a few seconds.

Taking a deep breath, Ezio followed suit. He managed the first two operations without difficulty, and even found the experience exhilarating, but he almost missed his hold on the third tier and swung dangerously outwards for a moment, until he corrected himself without losing momentum and found himself soon afterwards on the roof next to Yusuf.

'Don't stop to think,' Yusuf told him. 'Use your instincts and let the hook do the work. I can see that after another couple of climbs like that you'll have mastered it. You're a quick learner, Mentor.'

'I have had to be.'

Yusuf smiled. He extended his own blade again and showed Ezio the detail. 'The standard Ottoman hookblade has two parts, you see – the hook and the blade – so that you can use one or the other independently. An elegant design, no?'

'A pity I didn't have one of these in the past.'

'Perhaps then you had no need of one. Come!'

He bounded over the rooftops, Ezio following, remembering the distant days when he had chased after his brother Federico across the rooftops of Florence. Yusuf led him to places where he could practise some more, out of sight of prying eyes. Once Ezio had accomplished, with increasing confidence, another three climbs, Yusuf turned to him and said, a glint in his eye, 'There's still enough light left in the day. How about a bigger challenge?'

‘*Va bene*.’ Ezio grinned. ‘Let’s go.’

Yusuf took off, running again, through the emptying streets, until they reached the foot of the Galata Tower. ‘They don’t post guards in peacetime until the torches are lit on the parapets. We won’t be disturbed. Let’s go.’

Ezio looked up the great height of the tower and swallowed hard.

‘You’ll be fine. Follow my lead, take a run at it and let yourself go. Just throw yourself into it. And – again – let the hook do all the hard work. There are plenty of nooks and crannies in the stonework – you’ll be spoiled for choice about where to hook in.’

With a carefree laugh of encouragement, Yusuf set off. His skilful use of the blade made it look as if he were walking – running, even – straight up the wall of the tower. Moments later, Ezio, panting but triumphant, joined him on the roof and looked around him. As the young man on the ship had said, the views across the city were stunning. Ezio hadn’t had to wait for permission from some bureaucrat to see them. He identified all the landmarks the young man had introduced him too from the deck of the baghlah, using the opportunity to familiarize himself further with the city’s layout. Another part of his mind just drank in its beauty in the red-gold light of the setting sun. The light reminding him of the colour of the hair of the beautiful woman who’d been his fellow passenger, and who’d looked right through him.

‘Welcome to Istanbul, Mentor,’ said Yusuf, watching his face. ‘The Crossroads of the World.’

‘I can see now why they call it that.’

‘Many generations of men have ruled this city, but they have never subdued her. Whatever yoke is placed on her neck, whatever neglect or pillage is visited on her, she always bounces back.’

‘It seems a fine place to call home.’

‘It is.’

After another minute or two Yusuf stepped to the edge of the tower and looked down. He turned to Ezio again. ‘Race you to the bottom?’ he asked, and, without waiting for a reply, threw himself from the parapet in an astounding Leap of Faith.

Ezio watched him plummet like a hawk stooping and land safely in a haywain he’d already singled out, 175 feet below. Ezio sighed, pausing a moment longer to stare at the city spread out beneath him in wonder. The Great City. The First City. The heiress of Ancient Rome. Constantinople was a thousand years old, and had been home to hundreds of thousands of citizens at a time, in the not too distant past, when Rome and Florence were mere villages by comparison. She had been plundered and ravaged, and he knew the legendary beauty of the past

was gone forever; but she had always awed her attackers, and those who sought to reduce her; and, as Yusuf had said, she had never truly been subdued.

Ezio looked around one last time, scanning the whole horizon with his keen eyes. He fought down the deep sadness which filled his heart.

Then, in turn, he made his own Leap of Faith.

20

The following morning, Ezio and Yusuf sat in the courtyard of the Assassin headquarters, poring over plans spread on a table, planning their next move. There was no doubt in their minds that couriers from the Templars at Masyaf would very soon arrive here, if they had not done so already, and that a concerted Templar attack must be anticipated.

‘It’s like a hydra, the Templar organization,’ Ezio brooded. ‘Cut one head off and two grow back.’

‘Not in Rome, Mentor. You’ve seen to that.’

Ezio was silent. With his thumb, he tried the edge of the hookblade he was oiling. ‘I am certainly impressed by this weapon, Yusuf. My brothers in Rome would profit from having them as part of their equipment.’

‘It’s not a hard design to copy,’ Yusuf replied. ‘Just give credit where it’s due.’

‘I need more practice,’ Ezio said, little realizing that he’d get it soon enough, for at that moment the street door burst open before Azize had time to reach it and Kasim, one of Yusuf’s lieutenants, rushed in, his eyes wild.

‘Yusuf *bey* – come quickly!’

Yusuf was on his feet in an instant. ‘What’s going on?’

‘An attack on two fronts! Our Dens in Galata and at the Grand Bazaar.’

‘It never stops,’ Yusuf said, angrily. ‘Every day, the same bad news.’ He turned to Ezio. ‘Could this be the big attack you fear?’

‘I have no way of knowing, but it must be dealt with.’

‘Of course. How is your appetite for swordplay?’

‘I think you know the answer to that. I do what I must.’

‘Good man! It’s time to put your hookblade to some real use! Let’s go!’

21

In no time at all, they were sprinting across the rooftops in the direction of the Galata Den. As they grew close, they descended to the street in order to be less conspicuous to Byzantine crossbowmen. But they found their way blocked by a unit of heavily armed mercenaries, who ordered them, menacingly, to turn back. They pretended to retreat a few paces, conferring together.

‘Use your hookblade, Mentor,’ said Yusuf. ‘There’s a sure way to get past these thugs with the maximum of speed and the minimum of fuss.’

‘Sounds good to me.’

‘Watch. We call it a hook and roll.’

Without more ado, Yusuf turned back to the line of men spread out across the street facing them. He selected one and ran towards him at great speed. Before the man or any of his companions could react, Yusef leapt into the air immediately in front of his target, projecting his body forward with his hookblade unleashed and his right arm plunging down to stick the hook in the back of the man’s belt. Following through, Yusuf did a somersault over the man, releasing his blade as he did so, and carried on at speed away from the dumfounded mercenaries. Before they had time fully to regroup, Ezio followed Yusuf’s lead. As he somersaulted over his man, he managed to grab him by the neck and wrestle him to the ground. He landed some feet behind him, and ran on to join his companion.

But there were more guards ahead to deal with, and in doing so, Ezio picked up another technique from his Seljuk friend. This time, Yusuf swung the hook low, stooping as he approached his target, and wrapped his weapon round one of his opponent’s ankles, felling him as he swept past. Once again, Ezio copied the moves, and had soon caught up with the Leader of the Istanbul Assassins.

‘And that’s what we call a hook and run.’ Yusuf grinned. ‘But I can see you’re a natural. Excellent work.’

‘I almost stumbled back there. Need to improve.’

‘You’ll get plenty of practice.’

‘Look out, here come more of them!’

They were at the intersection of four streets, empty now – the fighting had caused the ordinary citizens to flee inside the buildings and shut the doors behind them. But Yusef and Ezio were cornered – big units of Byzantines were thundering towards them from each quarter.

‘What now?’ said Ezio, drawing his sword and releasing his left-hand hidden blade.

‘Put those away, Mentor. When he tires of running, an Assassin around here takes to the air.’

Ezio quickly followed Yusuf as he scaled the nearest wall, using his hook to aid him, with increasing skill. Once on the rooftops again, Ezio noticed that, in this area, many were topped with stout vertical wooden posts, from which tarred ropes, stretched taut. These led upwards and downwards to other posts on other rooftops, connected by a series of pulleys and blocks and tackle. Such a post stood on their roof, next to where they were standing.

‘We introduced this system to transport goods about, from warehouse to warehouse, from warehouse to shop,’ explained Yusuf. ‘You can find it in various districts all over the city. It’s a lot quicker than using the streets, which are too narrow and usually crowded. And it’s a lot quicker for us, too.’

Ezio looked down below to where the Byzantines were trying to break into the building they were standing on. Too heavily armoured to climb, they’d decided to come at them from the interior.

‘We’d better hurry.’

‘You use your hookblade for this, too,’ said Yusuf. ‘Just hook it onto a rope, hang on tight, and let go – of course, it only works downhill!’

‘I’m beginning to see why you developed this weapon – it’s perfect for Constantinople.’

‘You can say that again.’ Yusuf cast a glance down to the street below in his turn. ‘But you’re right – we must make haste.’ Briefly, he scanned the surrounding rooftops. About 300 feet away, on the roof of a building downhill from where they were, he spotted a Byzantine scout, his back to them, keeping a lookout over the city which spread itself below him.

‘See that man?’ Yusuf said.

‘Yes.’

‘And there’s another, just over there, to the left – on a connecting roof.’

‘Got him.’

‘We’re going to take them out.’ Yusuf extended his hookblade and notched it over the rope. He raised a warning hand as Ezio was about to do the same. ‘Do not follow me immediately. Allow me to show you.’

‘I am glad to learn the customs of the country.’

‘We call this a *zipline*. Watch!’

Yusuf waited until the second scout was looking in another direction, then let the rope take his weight. It strained slightly, but held. Then he swung his body clear, and in a moment he was sailing silently down the rope towards the unsuspecting first scout. At the last moment, he unhooked his blade and dropped the last few feet onto his target, swinging the blade round to slice into the man’s side. He caught the scout’s falling body and lowered it gently to the ground, before stepping quickly behind the cover of a small outbuilding on the roof. From there, he let out a strangled cry. This alerted the second scout, who turned quickly to look in the direction from which the sound had come.

‘Help, comrade! Assassins!’ Yusuf called in Greek, in an anguished tone.

‘Stand fast! I’m coming!’ the second scout called back, racing across the roof to the aid of his fellow.

At that moment, Yusuf beckoned to Ezio, who rocketed down the rope in his turn, in time to drop fatally onto the second scout, by that time kneeling next to the body of his fallen companion.

Yusuf joined him by the two bodies. ‘You didn’t even break a sweat,’ Yusuf said, chuckling. Then he immediately became serious, and continued, ‘I can see you can look after yourself, so I think it’s time we split up. I’d better head to the Bazaar and see what’s happening at our Den there. You go on to Galata to help them there.’

‘Tell me the way.’

Yusuf pointed across the rooftops. ‘You see the tower?’

‘Yes.’

‘The Den’s right by it. I can’t be in two places at once, but now you’re here, I don’t have to be. Thank Allah you came, Mentor. Without your help …’

‘You’ve done all right so far.’

Yusuf took his hand. ‘*Haydi rastgele* – Ezio. Good luck!’

‘Good luck to you, too.’

Yusuf turned south while Ezio ran over the russet-coloured tiles of the rooftops until he found another rope system. Sailing quickly and unopposed from holding post to holding post, and travelling a lot faster than he would have done on foot, he quickly made his way downwards towards the tower’s base, and his next battle.

22

Ezio arrived during a lull in the fighting and managed to slip into the Den without being seen. There, he was greeted by Dogan, one of the Assassin lieutenants he had briefly met earlier.

‘Mentor, it is an honour. Is Yusuf not with you?’

‘No – they’ve mounted another attack – on our Den by the Grand Bazaar. He’s on his way there now.’ Ezio paused. ‘What is the situation here?’

Dogan wiped his brow. ‘We’ve beaten back the vanguard, but they’ve just retreated to wait for reinforcements.’

‘Are your men ready for them?’

Dogan gave Ezio a wry smile, encouraged by the Mentor’s enthusiasm and confidence. ‘Now you’re here, they are!’

‘Where’s the next attack likely to come from?’

‘The north side. They think that’s the weakest.’

‘Then we’d better make sure it’s the strongest!’

Dogan redeployed his Assassins according to Ezio’s instructions, and by the time the Templars launched their counter-attack, they were ready for them. The fight was as fierce as it was short, leaving fifteen Templar mercenaries dead in the square near the tower where the Den was located. The Assassin troop counted two men and one woman wounded, but no fatalities. It had been a rout for the Templars.

‘They will not be back soon,’ Dogan told Ezio when it was all over.

‘Let’s hope so. From my experience of the Templars, they do not like to be bested.’

‘Well, if they try it again around here, they’ll have to learn to live with it.’

Ezio smiled, and clapped Dogan on the shoulder. ‘That’s the kind of talk I like to hear!’

He made to take his leave.

‘Where will you go now?’ asked Dogan.

‘I’m going to join Yusuf at the Den of the Grand Bazaar. Send word to me there if the Templars do regroup.’

‘In that unlikely event, you will be the first to know.’

‘And tend to your wounded. That sergeant of yours took a bad cut to the head.’

‘It is being attended to as we speak.’

‘Can I get there by using the zipline system?’

‘Once you reach the south bank of the Horn. But you must cross that by ferry. It’s the fastest way to the peninsular.’

‘Ferry?’

‘There was to have been a bridge, but for some reason it was never built.’

‘Ah yes,’ said Ezio. ‘I remember somebody mentioning that.’ He put out his hand. ‘*Allaha ismarladik*,’ he said.

‘*Güle güle*.’ Dogan smiled back.

The Den Ezio needed to reach was located not far from the Bazaar, in the Imperial District, between the Bazaar itself and the ancient church of Hagia Sofia, now converted by the Ottomans into a mosque. But the fighting was taking place a short distance to the south-west, close to the docks on the southern shores of the city. He stood for a moment on a rooftop, observing the battle, which was in full spate in the streets and on the quays below him. A rope from a wooden stake near him stretched down to a point near where he could see Yusuf, his back to the waters of the dock, in the thick of the fray. Yusuf was fending off a half-dozen burly mercenaries and his companions were too busy themselves to come to his aid. Ezio hooked onto the rope and swooped down, jumping from the rope at a height of twelve feet and spread-eagling himself, left-hand hidden blade extended, to land on the backs of two of Yusuf’s attackers, sending them sprawling. They were dead before they could react, and Ezio stood over them as the remaining four in their group turned to face him, giving Yusuf enough respite to edge round to their flank. Ezio kept his hookblade extended.

As the four Templar troopers fell roaring on Ezio, Yusuf rushed them from the side, his own hidden blade brought quickly into play. One huge soldier was almost upon Ezio, having backed him up against a warehouse wall, when Ezio remembered the hook and roll technique and used it to escape from and fell his opponent, stabbing the man’s writhing body with his hidden blade to deliver the coup de grâce. Meanwhile, Yusuf had despatched two of the others, while the survivor took to his heels.

Elsewhere, fierce fighting was simmering down as Yusuf’s brigade got the better of the Templars, who finally fled, cursing, into the depths of the city to the north.

‘Glad you arrived in time to meet my new playmates,’ said Yusuf, wiping and sheathing his sword, and retracting his hidden blade, as Ezio did likewise. ‘You

fought like a tiger, my friend, like a man late for his own – wedding.'

'Do you not mean funeral?'

'You would not mind being late for that.'

'Well, if we're talking about a wedding, I'm twenty-five years late already.' Ezio pushed the familiar darkening mood aside, and squared his shoulders. 'Did I arrive in time to save the Bazaar Den?'

Yusuf shrugged regretfully. 'Alas, no. We've only managed to save our own skins. The Bazaar Den is taken. Unfortunately, I arrived too late to regain it. They were too well entrenched.'

'Don't despair. The Galata Den is safe. The Assassins we used there can join us here.'

Yusuf brightened. 'With my "army" doubled in size, we'll take the Bazaar back together! Come! This way!'

23

They made their way through the market streets and the massive, glittering maze of the *souk* itself, the splendid, frenetic, gold and red Grand Bazaar, with its myriad lanes of little shops selling everything from scents to spices, sheepskins to costly Persian carpets from Isfahan and Kabul, cedar-wood furniture, swords and armour, brass and silver coffee pots with snaking spouts and elongated necks, tulip-shaped glasses for tea and larger more slender ones for *sharbat* – a cornucopia selling everything in the world a man could imagine or desire, amid a babel of traders' voices raised in at least a dozen different languages.

Once they'd passed out of the north-eastern side, they came to streets nearer the Den. Here, the Templar presence was strong. The buildings were hung with their banners, and the merchants who did business here, Ezio could see, were not infrequently being harassed or otherwise bullied by Byzantine toughs.

'As you can see,' Yusuf was telling him, 'when the Templars take over a district they like to flaunt it. It's a constant battle to keep them at bay, they like nothing better than to rub our noses in every victory they enjoy.'

'But why does the Sultan do nothing? This is his city!'

'Sultan Bayezid is far away. There aren't enough Ottoman resources for the governor here to keep matters in check. If it weren't for us …' Yusuf trailed off, then continued, following another train of thought, 'The Sultan is at war with his son Selim many leagues north-west of the city. He's been away for years, at least since the great earthquake in 1509, and even before that he was almost always absent. He is blind to all this turmoil.'

'The earthquake?' Ezio remembered news of that reaching Rome. Over 100 mosques had been reduced to rubble, along with 1000 other buildings, and 10,000 citizens had lost their lives.

'You should have seen it. We called it the Lesser Day of Judgement. The huge waves it caused in the Sea of Marmara almost brought down the southern walls. But the Sultan's eyes remained closed, even to that warning.'

'Ah, but your eyes are open, *sì*?'

'Like two full moons. Believe me.'

They had reached a large open *karesi*, thronged with Templar mercenaries, who began to eye them suspiciously as they crossed the square.

'Too many to engage directly,' Yusuf said. 'We'd better use one of these.'

He delved into the pouch at his side and produced a bomb.

'What's that – a smoke bomb?' Ezio said. 'Hmn. I'm not confident it will help us here.'

Yusuf laughed. 'Smoke bomb? Dear Ezio – Mentor – it's really high time you Italians joined the sixteenth century. These bombs do not obscure – they distract. Watch.'

Ezio stood back as Yusuf threw the bomb some distance away from him. It exploded harmlessly, but sent a shower of small, apparently gold coins into the air, which rained down over the mercenaries. Their attention was immediately distracted from Ezio and Yusuf as they hurried to pick up the coins, shouldering aside the civilians who tried to join in.

'What was that?' asked Ezio in astonishment as they continued on their way, now in no fear of molestation.

Yusuf smiled craftily. 'That's what we call a Gold Bomb. It's filled with coins made of pyrite – they look exactly like gold coins but they are very cheap to produce.'

Ezio watched the troopers scatter, oblivious to anything but the Fool's Gold.

'You see?' said Yusuf. 'They can't resist. But let's get a move on before they've picked them all up.'

'You are full of surprises today.'

'Crafting explosives is a new hobby of ours, one we've borrowed from the Chinese. We've taken to it with great passion.'

'I'm obviously getting rusty. But a friend of mine once made me some grenades, in Spain, long ago, so I know something of the subject. You'll have to teach me the new techniques.'

'Gladly – but who is the Mentor here, Ezio? I'm beginning to wonder.'

'That's enough of your cheek, Assassin!' Ezio grinned, clapping Yusuf on the shoulder.

A narrow street they'd been passing along now gave way to another square, and here again, in this Templar-infested district, was another large group of Byzantine mercenaries. They'd heard the commotion from the adjoining *karesi* and were looking restive. Yusuf drew a handful of small bombs from his pouch and handed them to Ezio. 'Your turn,' he said. 'Make me proud. The wind's behind us, so we should be all right.'

The Byzantines were already making for the two Assassins, drawing their swords. Ezio pulled the pins of the three bombs in his hands, and threw them

towards the oncoming mercenaries. They exploded on impact with the ground with little, harmless-sounding *pops*, and for a moment it looked as if nothing else had happened. But the Templar troops hesitated and looked at each other, then gagged and dabbed at their uniforms, which were covered with a stinking viscous liquid. Quickly, they beat a retreat.

'There they go,' said Yusuf. 'It'll be days before their women will take them back into their beds.'

'Another of your surprises?'

'Skunk-oil bombs. Very effective if you judge your moment and keep out of the prevailing wind!'

'Thanks for the warning.'

'What warning?'

'Exactly.'

'Hurry. We're nearly there.'

They'd crossed the *karesi* into another street, broader this time, but lined with what looked liked boarded-up shops. Yusuf paused at one of them and pushed cautiously at its door, which swung open. Beyond it was a small, plain courtyard with a few barrels and packing-cases stacked up along the far wall. In the middle was an open trapdoor, with stone steps leading down from it. A tower rose from the rear left-hand corner of the courtyard.

'As I thought,' said Yusuf. He turned to Ezio and spoke urgently. 'This is one of our underground Dens. It looks deserted but below, the Templars will have it well guarded. Among their rabble there's a Templar captain. May I ask you to find and kill him?'

'I'll get your hideout back for you.'

'Good. When you've done so, climb that tower and set off the signal flare you'll find there. It's another one of our bombs, and it's a copy of the flares the Templars use to signal a retreat.'

'And you?'

'It won't take those Templars in the square long to realize what's happened, so I'll go back and find a way of stopping them from following us here and trying to reinforce their friends. I've got a couple of phosphorus bombs clipped to my tunic belt. They should do the trick.'

'So you *do* still use old-fashioned smoke screens?'

Yusuf nodded. 'Yes, but these are pretty nasty, so …' He drew a scarf over his nose and mouth. 'And before I go, there's one more little trick up my sleeve which should bring the rabbits out of their hole – I wouldn't want you to go down to the Den and fight those thugs in semi-darkness. Once they've surfaced, you should be able to pick them off without too much trouble.' From his pouch,

he produced a final, grenade-like bomb, and hefted it for a moment. ‘I’ll set this off now, and then be on my way. We’ve got to neutralize both groups of Templars simultaneously or we’ll be lost. Just cover your ears – this is a cherry-bomb packed with sulphur, so it’ll make a noise like a thunderclap. It’ll bring them up all right, but I don’t want you to burst your eardrums.

Ezio did as he was bidden, moving back to a strategic position on the shady side of the courtyard, with a good view of the trapdoor. He exchanged his left-hand hidden blade for his adapted pistol harness, preferring to retain the hookblade for close combat. Yusuf, near the street, threw his cherry-bomb to the far side of the courtyard and then disappeared.

There was a noise as loud as the Devil’s Fart, and Ezio, though he’d covered his ears beneath his hood firmly, still had the aftershock in his head. He shook it to clear it, and as he did so, ten Templars, led by a ruddy-nosed captain, burst from the trapdoor into the sunlight, looking around them in panic. Ezio moved in swiftly and cut three down before they’d had time to react. Using his hookblade he was able to kill another three in the next minute of combat. Three more ran off, as they heard the sound of two more explosions, followed shortly afterwards by the faint smell of smoke in the breeze.

‘Perfect timing, Yusuf,’ murmured Ezio to himself.

The captain of the cohort stood and confronted Ezio. A brawny, wall-eyed man in well-used black shoulder armour, over his dark red tunic. He held a heavy Damascus in his right hand, and a wicked-looking, curved dagger, with a barbed point, in his right.

‘Rip and slit,’ said the captain in a hoarse voice. ‘I hook you in with the dagger and slit your throat with the sword. You’re as good as dead, Assassin.’

‘It’s really high time you Templars joined the sixteenth century,’ replied Ezio, raising his left arm and springing his pistol into his hand. He fired, thinking that at this range he really couldn’t miss, even left-handed, and, sure enough, the ball sank into the bone straight between the captain’s eyes.

He was still sinking to his knees as Ezio sprang across the courtyard, leapt onto one of the barrels for purchase, and used the hookblade to surge to the top of the tower.

The flare Yusuf had told him of had not been discovered or disturbed. There was a little mortar and Ezio loaded the flare into it. A moment later, it streaked high into the sky, trailing a vivid streak of flame and violet smoke.

By the time he reached the foot of the tower again, Yusuf was waiting for him.

‘No wonder you are our Mentor,’ said the Seljuk Assassin. ‘You could not have timed that better.’ He beamed in triumph. ‘The Templars are withdrawing on all fronts.’

24

The Bazaar Den was remarkably neat and tidy, given its recent occupation by the Templars.

‘Any damage?’ Ezio asked Yusuf, as his Turkish comrade stared at the ceiling.

‘Not that I can see. Byzantine Templars may be bad hosts, but they are decent tenants. Once they capture a location, they like to keep it intact.’

‘Because they intend to stay?’

‘Exactly!’ Yusuf rubbed his hands. ‘We must take advantage of our little victories to prepare you further for the fight against our Greek friends,’ he said. ‘I’ve shown you how to use some of our bombs but it’ll be even better if you know how to make them.’

‘Is there someone here who can teach me?’

‘Of course! The master himself! Piri Reis.’

‘Piri Reis is … one of us?’

‘In a manner of speaking. He likes to keep himself aloof. But he’s certainly on our side.’

‘I thought he was more of a mapmaker,’ said Ezio, remembering the map of Cyprus he’d been given by Ma’Mun.

‘Mapmaker, seafarer, pirate – though these days he’s rising swiftly through the ranks of the Ottoman Navy – he’s a pretty good all-rounder. And he knows Istanbul – Kostantiniyye – like the back of his hand.’

‘Good – because there’s something I’d like to ask him about the city that he may know – apart from how to make bombs. When can I meet him?’

‘No time like the present. And we don’t have any to lose. Are you all right after that little skirmish? Need some rest?’

‘No.’

‘Good! I’ll take you to him now. His workroom isn’t far from here.’

Piri Reis – Admiral Piri – had a small set of second-storey, open-plan rooms on the north side of the Grand Bazaar, whose tall windows threw a cold, clear light on the handful of map tables neatly arranged on the teak floors of a cramped studio. Equally neatly spread out on the tables were maps of a greater number

and variety than Ezio had ever seen before and, seated by them, a handful of assistants were diligently working in silence. The western and southern walls of the workroom were festooned with more maps, all neatly pinned up and squared-off to one another. Five large globes, one in each corner and one in the centre of the room, completed the picture. The globes were also works in progress, and freshly inked-in areas showed the latest discoveries added.

The western wall was also covered with detailed technical drawings, expertly accomplished – but these were, as Ezio saw at a glance, designs for bombs. He was able to read enough as he passed through the room to where Piri sat, to see that the bomb drawings were divided into categories: Lethal, Tactical, Diversionary, and Special Casings. An alcove in the wall was big enough to contain a worktable and behind it, arranged with precision, a number of metalworkers' tools were placed on shelves.

This was quite a contrast to the chaos in which Leonardo loved to work, Ezio thought, smiling to himself at the memory of his friend.

Yusuf and Ezio found Piri himself at work at a large drafting table directly under the windows. Six or seven years younger than Ezio, he was a tanned, weather-beaten, healthy and robust figure of a man, wearing a blue silk turban, under which a strong face, currently bearing an expression of intense concentration, looked out at the work through piercing, clear grey eyes. His luxuriant brown beard was neatly trimmed, though worn long, covering the collar of his high-necked, silver-brocade tunic. Baggy blue trousers and plain wooden clogs completed his outfit.

He gave Ezio an appraising glance, which Ezio returned, as Yusuf made the introductions.

'What's your name again?' said Piri.

'Ezio. Ezio Auditore da Firenze.'

'Ah yes. I thought for a moment Yusuf said "Lothario". Didn't hear the difference.' He looked at Ezio, and Ezio could have sworn there was a twinkle in his eye. Had Ezio's reputation – in one department at least – preceded him? He thought he was going to like this man.

'I have seen your work – your maps, anyway,' Ezio began. 'I had a copy of the one you made for Cyprus.'

'Did you?' replied the sailor, gruffly. Clearly he didn't like having his work interrupted. Or at least that was the impression he wanted to give.

'But it is another aspect of your expertise I have come to seek your advice about today.'

'That was a good map, the one of Cyprus,' said Piri, ignoring Ezio's remark. 'But I've improved it since. Show me yours.'

Ezio hesitated. ‘I don’t have it any more,’ he confessed. ‘I gave it – to a friend of mine.’

Piri looked up. ‘Very generous of you,’ he said. ‘Do you know what my maps are worth?’

‘Indeed. But I owed this man my life.’ Ezio hesitated again. ‘He’s a seaman, like yourself.’

‘Hmn. What’s his name? I might have heard of him.’

‘He’s a Mamluk. Goes by the name of al-Scarab.’

Piri suddenly beamed. ‘That old rogue! Well, I hope he puts it to good use. At least he knows better than to try anything on with us.’ He turned his eye on Yusuf. ‘Yusuf! What are you doing still standing there? Don’t you have anything better to do? Take yourself off and leave your friend with me. I’ll see that he has everything he needs. Any friend of al-Scarab is a friend of mine!’

Yusuf grinned and took his leave. ‘I knew I’d be leaving you in safe hands,’ he said.

When they were alone, Piri became more serious. ‘I know who you are, Ezio, and I have a pretty good idea why you are here. Will you take some refreshment? There’s coffee, if you like it.’

‘I have acquired a taste for it at last.’

‘Good!’ Piri clapped his hands at one of his assistants, who nodded and went to the back of the workshop, to return soon afterwards with a brass tray holding a serpentine pot, with minute cups, and a dish of soft amber-coloured sweetmeats, which Ezio had never tasted before.

‘I remember al-Scarab from my own privateering days,’ Piri said. ‘We fought side by side at both battles of Lepanto a dozen years or so ago, under the flag of my uncle Kemal. No doubt you’ve heard of him?’

‘Yes.’

‘The Spaniards fought us like tigers, but I didn’t think so much of the Genoese or the Venetians. You’re a Florentine, yourself, aren’t you?’

‘Yes.’

‘So you’re a landlubber.’

‘My family were bankers.’

‘On the surface, yes! But something far more noble underneath.’

‘As you know, banking does not run in my blood as seafaring does in yours.’

Piri laughed. ‘Well said!’ He sipped his coffee, wincing as he burned his lips. Then he eased himself off his stool and stretched his shoulders, laying down his pen. ‘And that’s quite enough small talk. I see you’re already looking at the drawings I’m working on. Make any sense of them?’

‘I can see they’re not maps.’

‘Is it maps you’re after?’

‘Yes and no. There is one thing I want to ask you – about the city – before I talk about anything else.’

Piri spread his hands. ‘Go ahead.’

Ezio took Niccolò Polo’s book, *The Secret Crusade*, out of his side-wallet, and showed it to Piri.

‘Interesting,’ said the seaman. ‘Of course I know all about the Polos. Read Marco’s book. Exaggerates a bit, if you ask me.’

‘I took this from a Templar at Masyaf. Yusuf knows of it, and of its contents.’

‘Masyaf? So you have been there.’

‘It mentions the five keys to Altaïr’s library. From my reading of it, I see that Altaïr entrusted the keys to Niccolò, and that he brought them here and concealed them.’

‘And the Templars know this? So it’s a race against time.’

Ezio nodded. ‘They’ve already found one, hidden in the cellars of the Topkapi Palace. I need to recover it and find the other four.’

‘So – where will you begin?’

‘Do you know the location of the Polos’ old trading post here?’

Piri looked at him. ‘I can tell you exactly where it was. Come over here.’ He led the way to where a large, immensely detailed map of Constantinople hung on the wall in a plain gold frame. He peered at it for an instant, then tapped a spot with his index finger. ‘It’s there. Just to the west of Hagia Sofia. No distance from here. Why? Is there a connection?’

‘I have a hunch I need to follow.’

Piri looked at him. ‘That is a valuable book,’ he said, slowly.

‘Yes. Very valuable, if I’m right.’

‘Well just make sure it doesn’t fall into the wrong hands.’ He was silent for a long moment, thinking. ‘Be careful when you find the Polos’ old trading post,’ he said. ‘You may find more than you bargain for there.’

‘Does that remark beg a question?’

‘If it does, it is a question to which I have no answer. I just ask you to be wary, my friend.’

Ezio hesitated before taking Piri further into his confidence. ‘I think my quest will start in that place. I am sure there must be something hidden there which will give me my first clue.’

‘It is possible,’ Piri said, giving nothing away. ‘But heed my warning.’

Then he brightened, rubbing his hands vigorously, as if to chase away demons. ‘And now that we’ve settled that matter, what else can I help you with?’

‘I’m sure you’ve guessed. I am here on an Assassin mission, perhaps the most important ever, and Yusuf tells me you would be prepared to show me how to make bombs. The special ones you’ve developed here.’

‘Ach, that Yusuf has a big mouth.’ Piri looked serious again. ‘I cannot compromise my position, Ezio. I am Senior Navigator in the Sultan’s Navy, and this is my current project.’ He waved his hands at the maps. Then he winked. ‘The bombs are a sideline. But I like to help my true friends in a just cause.’

‘You may rely on my discretion. As I hope I may on yours.’

‘Good. Follow me.’

So saying, Piri led the way to the spacious alcove on the west wall. ‘The bombs are actually part of a naval-research project too,’ he continued. ‘Through my soldiering, I have gained an appreciation for artillery and explosives and that has served the Assassins well. It gives us an edge.’

He waved his hand at the technical drawings. ‘I have developed many kinds of bomb, and some are reserved for the use of your Brotherhood alone. As you can see, they are divided into four main categories. Of course they are expensive, but the Brotherhood has always understood that.’

‘Yusuf told me the Assassins here are short of funds.’

‘Most good causes usually are,’ replied Piri. ‘But Yusuf is also resourceful. I gather you know how to use these weapons?’

‘I had a crash course.’

Piri looked at him levelly. ‘Good. Well, as Yusuf evidently promised you, if you want to craft your own bombs, I can show you.’

He went round the table and picked up two pieces of strange-looking metal lying on it. Ezio, leaning forward curiously, reached for a third.

‘Ah ah ah! Don’t touch that!’ warned Piri. ‘One wrong move and BANG! The building comes down.’

‘Are you serious?’

Piri laughed. ‘The look on your face! I’ll show you.’

For the next few hours, Piri Reis took Ezio through the basic steps involved in constructing each kind of bomb and explained the materials involved.

Ezio learned that each bomb or grenade contained the fundamental ingredient of gunpowder, but that not all were designed to be lethal. He’d already had experience of lethal grenades when attacking Cesare Borgia’s fleet in Valencia four years earlier. Yusuf had shown him how to use diversionary bombs which created smokescreens, thunderclaps, appalling odours and apparent pennies from heaven. Piri now demonstrated other applications. Among the bombs with lethal effect were those using coal dust, which added a heavy blasting power to the gunpowder, and fragmentation bombs whose shrapnel killed messily over a wide

range. Bombs containing sachets of lambs' blood scattered their opponents with it, causing them to think they had been wounded, panicking them. Another type of non-lethal grenade, useful in delaying pursuers, was the caltrop bomb, which showered numbers of twisted-together nails in the path of an oncoming enemy. Perhaps the most unpleasant were the bombs which used either datura powder or deadly nightshade.

'Datura and deadly nightshade are two of what we call the witches' weeds, along with henbane and mandrake,' Piri explained, his face grave. 'I do not like to use them except in cases of great extremity and danger. When exploded in the midst of an enemy, datura causes delirium, deranging the brain, and death. It is perhaps the worst of all. Deadly nightshade produces a poison gas which is equally lethal.'

'The Templars would not hesitate to use them against us, if they could.'

'That is one of the moral paradoxes mankind will wrestle with until the day he becomes truly civilized,' replied Piri. 'Is it evil to use evil to combat evil? Is agreeing with that argument merely a simple justification for something none of us should really do?'

'For now,' said Ezio, 'there is not leisure to ponder such questions.'

'You'll find the ingredients for these bombs in locations about the city which Yusuf will tell you of,' said Piri. 'So keep your eyes open and your nose to the ground as you roam the streets.'

Ezio rose to take his leave. Piri extended a walnut-brown hand. 'Come back whenever you need more help.'

Ezio shook hands and was unsurprised at the firmness of the grasp.

'I hope we will meet again.'

'Oh,' said Piri with an enigmatic smile, 'I have no doubt of it.'

25

Following Piri Reis' instructions, Ezio made his way through the Bazaar once more, ignoring the insistent blandishments of the traders, until he reached the quarter west of the enormous bulk of Hagia Sofia. He almost got lost in the labyrinth of streets and alleyways around it, but came at last to the spot which, he was sure, Piri had indicated on his map.

A bookshop. And a Venetian name over the door.

He entered, and to his surprise and barely suppressed delight, found himself face to face with the young woman he had encountered on his voyage here. She greeted him warmly, but he saw immediately that he was merely being welcomed as a potential customer. There was no sign of recognition on her face.

'*Buon giorno! Merhaba!*' she said, switching automatically from Italian to Turkish. 'Please come in.'

She was busying herself among her stock, and, in turning, knocked over a pile of books. Ezio saw at a glance that this shop was the antithesis of Piri Reis' well-ordered studio.

'Ah!' said the woman. 'Excuse the clutter. I have not had time to tidy up since my trip.'

'You sailed from Rhodes, *no*?'

She looked at him in surprise. '*Sì*. How did you know?'

'We were on the same ship.' He bowed slightly. 'My name is Auditore, Ezio.'

'And I am Sofia Sartor. Have we met?'

Ezio smiled. 'We have now. May I look around?'

'*Prego*. Most of my best volumes are in the back, by the way.'

Under the pretext of looking at the books, stacked in apparent chaos on a maze of teetering wooden shelves, Ezio delved deeper into the dark confines of the shop.

'It's nice to meet another Italian in this district,' Sofia said, following him. 'Most of us keep to the Venetian District and Galata.'

'It's good to meet you too. But I thought the war between Venice and the Ottoman Empire would have driven most Italians away. After all, it's only seven or eight years ago.'

‘But Venice kept control of her islands in the White Sea, and everyone came to an arrangement,’ she replied. ‘At least, for the moment.’

‘So you stayed?’

She shrugged. ‘I lived here with my parents when I was a girl. True, when the war was on, we were pushed out, but I always knew I would return.’ She hesitated. ‘Where are you from?’

‘Florence.’

‘Ah.’

‘Is that a problem?’

‘No, no. I have met some very nice Florentines.’

‘There’s no need to sound so surprised.’

‘Forgive me. If you have any questions about the books, just ask.’

‘*Grazie*.’

‘There’s even more stock in the rear courtyard if you’re interested.’ She looked a little rueful. ‘More than I seem to be able to sell, to be honest.’

‘What took you to Rhodes?’

‘The Knights of Rhodes are uneasy. They know the Ottomans haven’t given up the idea of taking the island over. They think it’s only a question of time. Philippe Villiers de l’Isle Adam was selling off part of their library. So it was a shopping trip, if you like. Not very successful, either. The prices they were asking!’

‘De l’Isle Adam is a good Grand Master and a brave man.’

‘Do you know him?’

‘Only by repute.’

The woman looked at him as he poked around. ‘Look, nice as it is to chat with you – are you sure I cannot help? You seem a bit lost.’

Ezio decided to come clean. ‘I am not really looking to buy anything.’

‘Well,’ she replied, a touch crisply, ‘I’m not giving anything away free, *Messer*.’

‘Forgive me. Just bear with me a little longer. I will make it up to you.’

‘How?’

‘I’m working on that.’

‘Well, I must say—’

But Ezio silenced her with a gesture. He had manhandled one bookshelf from the back wall of the covered courtyard. The wall was thicker than the others, he could see that, and he’d noticed a crack in it that wasn’t a crack at all.

It was part of a doorframe, artfully concealed.

‘Dio mio!’ exclaimed Sofia. ‘Who put that there?’

‘Has anyone ever moved these bookshelves before?’

‘Never. They’ve been in place since before my father took over the shop, and before that, it had been in disuse for years – decades, even.’

‘I see.’ Ezio brushed dust and debris accumulated over what looked like far more than decades away from the door, but found no handle or any other means of opening it. Then he remembered the secret door which led to the vault back in Monteriggione, at his uncle’s fortress, and felt around for a hidden catch. Before long, the door swung open and inwards. Within the width of the wall steps led downwards into blackness.

‘This is incredible,’ said the woman, peering over Ezio’s shoulder. He smelt the soft scent of her hair, her skin.

‘With your permission, I’ll find out where it leads to,’ he said firmly.

‘I’ll fetch you some light. A candle.’

She was back in moments, with a candle and a tinderbox. ‘Who are you, *Messer*?’ she asked, looking into his eyes.

‘Only the most interesting man in your life.’

She smiled, quickly. ‘Ah! *Presuntuoso!* ’

‘Stay here. Let no one into the shop. I’ll be back before you know it.’

Leaving her, he descended the steps to the tunnel which led from their foot, deep in the earth.

26

Ezio found himself in a system of underground cisterns. By the feeble light of the candle, he could make out barrel-vaulted roofs supported by row upon row of slender columns, decorated at their capitals with a variety of symbols, among which Ezio recognized eyes. At their bases some of them, bizarrely, showed the inverted heads of monstrous gorgons.

Ezio recognized the place he must be in – the Yerebatan Sarnici. The great system of cisterns built below Constantinople. In his book, Niccolò Polo mentioned it. It had been built as a water-filtration system by Justinian 1000 years earlier. But knowing that didn't make it feel any less creepy. He was all but daunted at the vast, cavernous space around him, which he judged, from the echoes the sound of his movements made, to be a great as a cathedral. But he remembered that Niccolò had given some indication in *The Secret Crusade* of where one key might be found. The directions had been deliberately obscure, but Ezio decided to try to follow them, concentrating as he forced himself to remember the details.

It was hard to make no noise at all as he moved through the shallow water which covered the floor of the cistern, but with practice Ezio managed to reduce this to a minimum. Besides, any sound he made was soon drowned out by the noise of the unsuspecting people he heard up ahead. Evidently he was not alone in his quest, and he reminded himself that, before he got hold of the book, it had been in the Templars' possession.

There were lights up ahead as well. Ezio doused his candle and crept forward towards them. Soon, he made out the forms of two Templar foot soldiers, sitting by a small fire in a dark passage. Ezio drew closer. His Greek was good enough to pick up most of what they were saying.

The one who was speaking was in a bad mood, and not afraid to let it show. Indeed, he seemed on the edge of hysteria. '*Ti distihìa!*' he was saying in aggrieved tones. 'What misery! Do you know how long we've been searching this filthy cistern?'

'I've been here a few weeks,' replied his quieter friend.

‘That’s nothing! Try thirteen *months*! Ever since our Grand Master found that damned key!’ He calmed himself a little. ‘But he hasn’t got a clue what he’s doing. All he knows’ – the soldier’s tone became sarcastic – ‘is that they’re “somewhere in the city”.’

Hearing this, the other soldier grew more excited himself, sounding overwhelmed at the prospect ahead of them. ‘This is a very big city … ’

‘I know! That’s what I said myself – under my breath.’

They were interrupted by the arrival of a sergeant. ‘Get on with your work, you bums! You think you’re paid to sit around on your arses all day?’

Grumbling, the men resumed their task. Ezio shadowed them, hoping to pick up more information. The men were joined by a handful of other soldiers, similarly begrimed and discontented. But Ezio had to watch his step. Tired and disgruntled the soldiers may have been, but they were well trained, and vigilant.

‘Petros!’ one called to another. ‘Make sure we have enough torches for the excavation. I’m tired of stumbling around in the dark.’

Ezio pricked up his ears at the word ‘excavation’, but as he moved forward again his scabbard scraped against one of the columns, and the vaulted roofs echoed and amplified the slight sound.

The man called Petros darted a look behind him. ‘There’s someone down here with us!’ he hissed. ‘Keep your eyes open and your hands steady.’

The troops were instantly on the alert, urgently calling to one another in muted voices.

‘Do you see anything?’

‘Search every corner!’

Ezio retreated further into the shadows, and waited patiently for the panic to die down. At the same time he made a mental note to be extra careful himself in this exaggerated acoustic.

Gradually, the guards resumed their search. As he watched, he could see that their actions seemed aimless, and that they knew it. But he continued to watch, hoping to detect a pattern, listening to their desultory conversation as he did so.

‘It stinks down here.’

‘What do you expect? It’s a sewer.’

‘I could use a breath of air.’

‘Patience! Shift’s up in three hours!’

‘Keep it down, you!’ barked the sergeant, approaching again. ‘And keep your ears open. The Lord Jesus knows why they picked you lot for a delicate mission like this.’

Ezio moved forward, past the men, until he came upon a stone embankment, on which two junior officers were standing by a brazier. He listened in to their

conversation.

‘We’re one step ahead of the Assassins, I know that much,’ one was saying to the other.

‘The Grand Master has ordered that we make all haste. They may be closer than we think.’

‘He must have his reasons. What do these keys look like anyway?’

‘Like the one we discovered beneath Topkapi. That’s got to be the assumption.’

The other lieutenant shook himself. ‘Eight hours of this filth. *Apistefto!* ’

‘I agree. I’ve never been so bored in all my life.’

‘Yes. But we’re bound to find the keys soon.’

‘In your dreams.’

But the first lieutenant to speak had suddenly glanced round quickly. ‘What was that?’

‘Probably a rat. The Saviour knows, there are enough of them down here.’

‘All the shadows seem to move.’

‘It’s just the firelight.’

‘Someone is out there. I can feel it.’

‘Watch yourself. You’ll go stir-crazy.’

Ezio inched past them, moving as slowly as he could, despite wanting to rush, for he dared not make the water around his calves so much as ripple. At last he found himself well beyond the two officers and the rest of the Templars, feeling his way along the wall of a dank corridor, much lower and narrower than the pillared halls it led off. Somehow this felt right. As soon as the light and noise of the Templars had died out completely behind him, he felt secure enough to relight the candle, and drew it from his side-satchel along with the tinderbox, praying that he would drop neither as he juggled to strike a spark to light it.

At last he was ready. Pausing for a moment to ensure that he wasn’t being followed, he continued along the corridor as it twisted and turned and, to his consternation, divided into separate, alternative passageways. Occasionally he took the wrong one, and came up against a blank wall. Retracing his steps to find the right way again, he began to wonder if he were not in some kind of maze. Ever deeper and darker he went, praying he’d remember the way back, and that he could trust the bookshop owner, until he was rewarded by a dim glow ahead of him. No more than the glow of a firefly, but enough to guide him.

He followed the passageway until it opened out into a small circular chamber, its domed roof all but lost in the shadows above. Half columns stood along the walls at regular intervals, and there was no sound but that of dripping water.

In the centre of the chamber was a small stone stand, and on it rested a folded map. Ezio opened it and found it to be a plan of Constantinople in infinite detail, with the Polo brothers' old trading post clearly marked at its centre. Four lines divided the map and each demarcated section showed a landmark of the city. Around the margins of the map the titles of twelve books were written, but of these twelve the titles of four were placed, one each, next to each divided section of the map. These four books had their titles illuminated in green, blue, red and black.

Ezio carefully folded the map again and placed it in his satchel. Then he turned his attention to what was placed at the centre of the stone stand.

It was a carved stone disk, no more than four inches across. The disk was thin, tapering towards its outer edges, and made of a stone, which might have been obsidian. It was pierced at its exact centre by a precisely circular hole, half an inch in diameter. Its surface was covered with designs, some of which Ezio recognized from the Codex pages which had been in his father's and uncle's collection: a sun whose rays ended in outstretched hands extending towards a world; strange humanoid creatures of indeterminate sex, with exaggerated eyes, lips, foreheads and bellies; what looked like abstruse mathematical symbols and calculations.

From this, the lightning-bug glow emanated.

Carefully, almost reverently, Ezio took it in his hands. He had not experienced such a feeling of awe since he had last handled the Apple, and he already seemed to know what it was he was handling.

As he turned it over in his hands, its glow intensified.

Che sucede? Ezio thought. *What's happening … ?*

As he watched, the glow became a sunburst, from which he had to shield his eyes, as the chamber exploded into a hurricane of light.

27

Somehow Ezio was there and not there. He couldn't be sure if he was dreaming, or had fallen into some kind of trance. But he knew exactly when and where he was – it was centuries before his own birth – late in the twelfth century. The date of the Year of Our Lord 1189 floated through his consciousness, as he walked – or drifted – through swirling clouds and criss-crossing rays of unearthly light, which parted at last to reveal – at a distance – a mighty fortress. Ezio recognized the place at once: Masyaf. The clouds seem to bear him closer. There were sounds of fierce battle. Ezio saw cavalrymen and infantry locked in mortal combat. Then the noise of a horse's hooves, as it approached at full gallop. A young Assassin, dressed in white, cowled, rode furiously through the scene.

Ezio watched – and as he watched, seemed to lose himself – his own personality … Something was happening which seemed half recognized, half remembered; a message from a past of which he knew nothing, yet with which he was totally familiar …

The young man in white charged, with his sword drawn, through the gates into the midst of the skirmish. Two burly crusaders were about to deliver the coup de grâce to a wounded Assassin. Leaning from the saddle, the young man felled the first soldier with a clean stroke before reining his horse in and leaping off his mount in a swirl of dust. The second crusader had whirled round to confront him. In a second, the young man drew a throwing-knife and aimed it at the crusader, hurling it with deadly accuracy, so that it buried itself in the man's neck, just below the helmet. The man fell to his knees, then collapsed on his face in the dirt.

The young man dashed over to the aid of his comrade, who had collapsed against a tree. The injured man's sword had slipped from his hand, and he leant forward, his back against the tree trunk, grasping his ankle and grimacing.

'Where are you hurt?' asked the young man, urgently.

'Broken foot. You arrived in the nick of time.'

The young man bent down to his comrade and helped him to his feet, placing one of his arms round his shoulders and guiding him to a bench against the wall of a stone outbuilding.

The injured Assassin looked up at him. ‘What is your name, brother?’

‘Altaïr. Son of Umar.’

The injured Assassin’s face brightened in recognition. ‘Umar. A fine man, who died as he had lived – with honour.’

A third Assassin was staggering towards them from the main part of the battle, bloodied and exhausted. ‘Altaïr!’ he cried. ‘We have been betrayed! The enemy has overrun the castle!’

Altaïr ibn-La’Ahad finished dressing his fallen comrade’s wound. Patting him on the shoulder, he reassured him: ‘You’ll live.’ Then he turned to address the newcomer. No friendly look was exchanged between them. ‘Grave news, Abbas. Where is Al Mualim?’

Abbas shook his head. ‘He was inside when the crusaders broke through. We can do nothing for him now.’

Altaïr didn’t reply immediately, but turned to face the castle, rising up among its rocky crags a few hundred yards away. He was thinking.

‘Altaïr!’ Abbas interrupted him. ‘We must fall back!’

Altaïr turned back to him calmly. ‘Listen. When I close the castle gates, flank the crusader units in the village and drive them into the canyon to the west.’

‘Same foolhardiness,’ growled Abbas angrily. ‘You don’t stand a chance!’

‘Abbas!’ retorted Altaïr sternly. ‘Just – make no mistakes.’

Remounting, he rode towards the castle. As he cantered along the familiar roadway, he was grieved at the scenes of destruction which met his eye. Villagers were straggling along the side of the path. One raised her head as she was passing and cried: ‘Curse these crusaders! May they fall beneath your sword, every one of them!’

‘Leave prayers to the priests, my sister.’

Altaïr spurred his horse on, his progress slowed by pockets of crusaders engaged in looting and preying upon those denizens of Masyaf attempting to regain the village from the beleaguered fortress. Three times he had to expend precious time and energy in defending his people from the depredations of these surly Franks who styled themselves Soldiers of Christ. But the words of gratitude and encouragement rang in his ears as he rode on, and spurred his purpose.

‘Bless you, Assassin!’

‘I was certain I’d be killed! Thank you!’

‘Drive these crusaders back into the sea, once and for all!’

At last he reached the gate. It yawned open. Looking up, Altaïr could see a fellow Assassin frantically working at the winch mechanism on the gatehouse,

some 100 feet above. A platoon of Assassin foot soldiers were grouped at the foot of one of the nearby towers.

‘Why is the gate still open?’ Altaïr called to him.

‘Both winches are jammed. The castle is swarming with the enemy.’

Altaïr looked into the courtyard to see a group of crusaders making for him. He addressed the lieutenant in charge of the platoon. ‘Hold this position.’

Sheathing his sword and dismounting, he started to climb the outer wall of the gatehouse, and shortly afterwards arrived at the side of the comrade who was working to free the winches. Frantically they worked on them, and their combined strength prevailed – at least enough to free the gate partially, and it slipped down a few feet, juddering and groaning.

‘Nearly there,’ said Altaïr, through gritted teeth. His muscles bulged as he and his fellow Assassin struggled to dislodge the cogs of the second winch. At last it gave, and the gate came crashing down on the melee between Assassins and crusaders taking place below. The Assassins managed to leap clear, but the crusaders’ troop was divided by the falling gate, some inside the castle, others now trapped outside.

Altaïr made his way down the stone steps that led from the top of the gatehouse to the central courtyard of Masyaf. The scattered bodies of Assassins attested to the fierce fighting that had only recently taken place here. As he looked around, scanning the ramparts and battlements, a door in the Great Keep opened, and from it emerged a group of people who made him draw in his breath sharply. A company of elite crusader infantrymen surrounded the Mentor of the Brotherhood – Al Mualim. The old man was semi-conscious. He was being dragged along by two brutal-looking troopers. With them was a figure with a dagger, whom Altaïr recognized. A big, tough man with dark, unreadable eyes, and a deep disfiguring scar on his chin. His thin hair was tied up in a black ribbon.

Haras.

Altaïr had long wondered where Haras’s true loyalties lay. An Assassin adept, he had never seemed satisfied with the rank assigned to him within the Brotherhood. He was a man who sought an easy route to the top, rather than one which rewarded merit. Though a man with a well-deserved reputation as a fighter, chameleon-like, he had always managed to worm his way into other people’s confidence by adapting his personality to suit theirs. His ambitions had clearly got the better of him and seeing an opportunity, he had traitorously thrown in his lot with the crusaders. Now, he even dressed in crusader uniform.

‘Stand back, Altaïr!’ he cried. ‘Another step, and your Mentor dies!’

At the sound of the voice, Al Mualim rallied, stood proud, and raised his own voice. ‘Kill this wretch, Altaïr! I do not fear death!’

‘You won’t leave this place alive, Traitor!’ Altaïr called to Haras.

Haras laughed. ‘No. You misunderstand. I am no traitor.’ He took a helmet which was hanging from his belt and donned it. A crusader helmet! Haras laughed again. ‘You see? *I could never betray those I never truly loved*.’

Haras started to walk towards Altaïr.

‘Then you are doubly wretched,’ said Altaïr, ‘for you have been living a lie.’

Things happened quickly then. Haras drew his sword and lunged towards Altaïr. At the same moment, Al Mualim managed to break free of his guards and with a strength which belied his age wrested the sword from one of them and cut him down. Profiting from Haras’ momentary distraction, Altaïr unleashed his hidden blade and struck at the traitor. But Haras squirmed out of the way and brought his own sword down in a cowardly stroke while Altaïr was off-balance. Altaïr rolled to one side, springing back to his feet quickly as a knot of crusaders rushed to Haras’s defence. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Al Mualim fighting another group.

‘Kill the bastard!’ snarled Haras, stepping out of harm’s way.

Altaïr tasted fury. He surged forward, slicing through the throats of two crusader assailants. The others fell back in fear, leaving Haras isolated and petrified. Altaïr cornered him where two walls met. He had to make haste and finish the job to go to his Mentor’s assistance.

Haras, seeing him momentarily distracted cut at him quickly ripping the cloth of his tunic. Altaïr lashed back in retaliation and plunged his hidden blade straight into the base of Haras’ neck, just above the sternum. With a strangled cry, the traitor fell back, crashing against the wall. Altaïr stood over him.

Haras looked up as Altaïr’s figure blocked the sun. ‘You put too much faith in the hearts of men, Altaïr,’ he said, barely getting the words out as the blood bubbled from his chest. ‘The Templars know *what is true*. Humans are weak, base and petty.’ He didn’t know he could have been describing himself.

‘No, Haras. Our Creed is evidence to the contrary. Try to return to it, even now, in your last hour. I beg you out of pity to redeem yourself.’

‘You will learn, Altaïr. And you will learn the hard way.’ Nevertheless Haras paused in thought for a moment, and even as the light in his eyes slowly died, he fought for speech. ‘Perhaps I am not wise enough to understand, but I suspect the opposite of what you believe is true. I am at least too wise to believe such rubbish as you do.’ Then his eyes became marble, and his body leant to one side, a long rattling sigh escaping from it as it relaxed in death.

The doubt Haras seeded in Altaïr's mind didn't take root immediately. There was too much to be done for there to be time for thought. The young man wheeled round and joined his Mentor, fighting shoulder to shoulder until the crusader band was routed, either sprawled in the bloody dust or fled.

Around them the signs were that the battle had turned in the Assassins' favour. The crusader army was beating a retreat from the castle, though the battle beyond it continued. Messengers soon arrived to confirm this.

Recovering from their exertions, Altaïr and Al Mualim paused for a moment's respite under a tree by the side of the gate of the Great Keep.

'That man – that wretch, Haras – you offered him a last chance to salvage his dignity, to see the error of his ways. Why?'

Flattered that his Mentor should seek his opinion, Altaïr replied, 'No man should pass from this world without knowing some kindness, some chance of redemption.'

'But he shunned what you proffered him.'

Altaïr shrugged mildly. 'That was his right.'

Al Mualim watched Altaïr's face closely for a moment, then smiled and nodded. Together, they started to walk towards the castle gate. 'Altaïr,' Al Mualim began, 'I have watched you grow from a boy to a man in a very short time – and I have to say that this fills me with as much sadness as pride. But one thing is certain: you fit Umar's shoes as if they had been made for you.'

Altaïr raised his head. 'I did not know him as a father. Only as an Assassin.'

Al Mualim placed a hand on his shoulder. 'You, too, were born into this Order – this Brotherhood.' He paused. 'Are there ever times when you – regret it?'

'Mentor – how can I regret the only life I have ever known?'

Al Mualim nodded sagely, looking up briefly to make a sign to an Assassin lookout perched high on the parapet wall. 'You may find another way in time, Altaïr. And if that time comes, it will be up to you to choose the path you prefer.'

In response to Al Mualim's signal, the men in the gatehouse were winching up the castle gate again.

'Come, my boy,' the old man said, 'and ready your blade. This battle is not won yet.'

Together, they strode towards the open gate, into the bright sunshine beyond.

Bright sunshine, a white light so strong, so all-encompassing that Ezio was dazzled. He blinked to rid his eyes of the multi-coloured shapes that appeared before them, shaking his head vigorously to escape from whatever vision had him in its grip. He squeezed them tight shut. When he opened them, his heartbeat had begun to settle to its normal rhythm, and he found himself once

again in the subterranean chamber, the soft light returned. He found that he was still holding the stone disk in his hand and now he was in no doubt at all about what it was.

He had found the first key.

He looked at his candle. He had seemed to be away for a long time, and yet the flame burned steadily and had eaten up scarcely any tallow.

He stowed the key with the map in his pouch, and turned to make his way back to the daylight, and to Sofia.

28

Excitedly, Sofia put down the book she'd been trying to read, and ran over to him, but drawing the line at taking him in her arms. 'Ezio! *Salve!* I'd thought you were gone forever!'

'So did I,' said Ezio.

'Did you find anything?'

'Yes I did. Something that may interest you.'

They walked over to a large table, which Sofia cleared of books as Ezio produced the map he'd found and spread it out.

'Mio Dio, how beautiful!' she exclaimed. 'And look – there's my shop. In the middle.'

'Yes. It's on a very important site. But look at the margins.'

She produced a pair of eyeglasses, and, bending over, examined the book titles closely.

'Rare books, these. And what are the symbols surrounding them?'

'That's what I hope to find out.'

'Some of these books are really extremely rare. And a few of them haven't been seen for – well – more than a millennium! They must be worth a fortune!'

'Your shop is on the very site of the trading post once run by the Polo brothers – Niccolò and Maffeo. Niccolò hid these books around the city. This map should tell us where, if we can find out how to interpret it.'

She took off her glasses and looked at him, intrigued. 'Hmmn. You are beginning to interest me. Vaguely.'

Ezio smiled and leant forward. He pointed to the map. 'From what I can see, from among the twelve titles, I need to find these three first.'

'What of the others?'

'That remains to be seen. They may be deliberate red herrings. But I am convinced that these are the ones to concentrate on. They may contain clues about the locations of the rest of *these*.'

He produced the round stone from his satchel. She donned her glasses again and peered at it. The she stood back, shaking her head. '*Molto curioso*.'

'It's the key to a library.'

‘Doesn’t look like a key.’

‘It’s a very special library. Another has been found already – beneath the Topkapi Palace. But, God willing, there is still time to find the others.’

‘Found – by whom?’

‘Men who do not read.’

Sofia grinned at that. But Ezio remained earnest.

‘Sofia – do you think you could try to decipher this map? Help me find these books?’

She studied the map again for a few minutes, in silence. Then she straightened and looked at Ezio, smiling, a twinkle in her eye. ‘There are plenty of reference books in this shop. With their help, I think I can unravel this mystery. But on one condition.’

‘Yes?’

‘May I borrow the books when you’ve found them?’

Ezio looked amused. ‘I daresay we can work something out.’

He took his leave. She watched him go, then closed the shop for the day. Returning to the table, after collecting a number of tomes from the shelves nearby to help her, and a notebook and pens, she pulled up a chair and settled down at once to examining the map in earnest.

29

The next day, Ezio met Yusuf near the Hippodrome in the south-east quarter of the peninsular. He found him conferring with a group of younger associates over a map they were studying. The meeting broke up as Ezio arrived, and Yusuf folded up his map.

‘Greetings, Mentor,’ he said. ‘If I’m not mistaken, there’s a pleasant surprise in store. And if I’m not dead by this time tomorrow, we should have some good stories to trade.’

‘Is there a chance of your being dead?’

‘We’ve had wind of a plan the Byzantines are hatching. Now that the young Prince Suleiman has returned from the *hajj*, they plan to infiltrate the Topkapi Palace. They’ve chosen this evening to make their move.’

‘What’s special about this evening?’

‘There’s an entertainment at the palace. A cultural event. An exhibition of paintings – people like the Bellini brothers – and Seljuk artists too. And there’ll be music.’

‘So what’s our plan?’

Yusuf looked at him gravely. ‘My brother, this is not your fight. There is no need for you to ensnare yourself in Ottoman affairs.’

‘Topkapi concerns me. The Templars found one of the keys to Altaïr’s library beneath it and I’d like to know how.’

‘Ezio, our plan is to protect the prince, not interrogate him.’

‘Trust me, Yusuf. Just show me where to go.’

Yusuf looked unconvinced, but said, ‘The rendezvous is at the main gate of the palace. We plan to disguise ourselves as musicians and walk right in with the authentic players.’

‘I’ll meet you there.’

‘You’ll need a costume. And an instrument.’

‘I used to play the lute.’

‘We’ll see what we can do. And we’d better place you with the Italian musicians. You don’t look Turkish enough to pass for one of us.’

By dusk, Ezio, Yusuf and his picked team of Assassins, all dressed in formal costumes, had assembled near the main gate.

‘Do you like your getup?’ asked Yusuf.

‘It’s fine. But the sleeves are cut tight. There was no room for any concealed weapon.’

‘You can’t play a lute in loose sleeves. And that’s what you are – a lute-player. Isn’t that what you wanted?’

‘True.’

‘And we are armed. You mark any targets, and leave it to us to take them out. Here’s your instrument.’ He took a fine lute from one of his men and passed it to Ezio, who tried it tentatively.

‘By Allah, you’ll have to make a better sound than that!’ said Yusuf.

‘It’s been a long time.’

‘Are you sure you know how to play that thing?’

‘I learned a few chords when I was young.’

‘Were you really ever young?’

‘A long time ago.’

Yusuf twitched at his own costume, a green and yellow satin number. ‘I feel ridiculous in this outfit. I look ridiculous!’

‘You look just like all the other musicians, and that’s the important thing. Now, come on – the orchestra’s assembling.’

They crossed to where a number of Italian instrumentalists were milling about, impatient to gain entry to the palace. Yusuf and his men were equipped as Turkish musicians, with tanburs, ouds, kanuns and kudüms, all instruments which, between them, they could play passably. Ezio watched them being ushered through a side entrance.

Ezio found it agreeable to be among his fellow countrymen again, and dipped in and out of conversation with them.

‘You’re from Florence? Welcome! This should be a good gig,’ one told him.

‘You call this a good gig?’ a viol player chipped in. ‘You should try playing in France! They’ve got all the best people. I was there not six months ago and heard Josquin’s *Qui Habitat*. It’s the most beautiful chorale I’ve ever listened to. Do you know his work, Ezio?’

‘A little.’

‘Josquin,’ said the first musician, a sackbut player. ‘Yes, he’s a treasure. There’s certainly no man in Italy to match his talent.’

‘Our time will come.’

‘I see you’re a lutenist, Ezio,’ a man carrying a chitarra said to him. ‘I’ve been experimenting with alternative tunings lately. It’s a wonderful way to spark new

ideas. For example, I've been tuning my fourth string to a minor third. It gives a very sombre sound. By the way, did you bring any extra strings with you? I must have broken six this month.'

'Josquin's music's too experimental for me,' said a citternist. 'Believe me, polyphony will never catch on.'

'Remind me,' said the chitarra player, ignoring his colleague's remark. 'I'd like to learn a few eastern tunings before we leave.'

'Good idea. I must say this is a great place to work. The people here are so kind, too. Not like Verona. You can hardly cross the street there these days without getting mugged,' a musician carrying a shawm put in.

'When do we go on?' Ezio asked.

'Soon enough,' replied the cittern player. 'Look, they're opening the gates now.'

The man with the viol plucked critically at his strings and then looked pleased. 'It's a splendid day for music, don't you think, Ezio?'

'I hope so,' Ezio replied.

They made their way to the gate, where Ottoman officials were checking people through.

Unluckily, when Ezio's turn came, one of them stopped him.

'Play us a tune,' he said. 'I like the sound of a lute.'

Ezio watched helplessly as his fellow musicians filed past. '*Perdonate, buon signore*, but I'm part of the entertainment for Prince Suleiman.'

'Any old *gerzek* can carry an instrument around, and we don't remember you being part of this particular band. So play us a tune.'

Taking a deep breath, Ezio started to pluck out a simple *ballata* he remembered learning when they still had the family palazzo in Florence. He twanged awfully.

'That's – forgive me – terrible!' said the official. 'Or are you into some new experimental music?'

'You might as well be strumming a washboard as strings, the racket you're making,' said another, coming over, amused.

'You sound like a dying cat.'

'I can't work under these circumstances,' Ezio said huffily. 'Give me a chance to get warmed up.'

'All right! And get yourself in tune while you're at it.'

Ezio willed himself to concentrate, and tried again. After a few initial stumbles, this time he managed to make a fair fist of a straightforward old piece by Landini. It was quite moving, in the end, and the Ottoman officials actually applauded.

‘*Pekala*,’ said the one who had first challenged him. ‘In you go, then, and bother the guests with that noise.’

Once inside, Ezio found himself in the midst of a great throng. A wide marble courtyard, partially covered, like an atrium, glittered with light and colour under the boughs of tamarinds. Guests were wandering about as servants made their way between them with trays loaded with sweetmeats and refreshing drinks. There were plenty of Ottoman gentry present, as well as diplomats, high-profile artists and businessmen from Italy, Serbia, the Peloponnese, Persia and Armenia. It was hard to detect any possible Byzantine infiltrators in this sophisticated assembly.

Ezio decided that his best course of action would be to try to rejoin the Italian musical troupe he’d been talking to, but took his time about it, getting the lie of the land.

But the royal guards were vigilant, and before long, one of them accosted him.

‘Excuse me, sir, are you lost?’

‘No.’

‘Musician are you? Well, you’re being paid to play not to mingle!’

Ezio was furious, but had to contain his anger in order not to blow his cover. Fortunately for him, he was rescued by a group of wealthy-looking locals, four sleek men and four heart-stoppingly beautiful women.

‘Play us something,’ they entreated, forming a circle round him.

Ezio ran through the Landini again, remembering some other pieces by that composer and praying that his audience wouldn’t find them too old-fashioned. But they were entranced. And, as his confidence increased, Ezio was pleased that his musicianship also improved. He even dared to improvise a little. And to sing.

‘*Pek güzel*,’ commented one of the men, as he finished a set.

‘Indeed – quite beautiful,’ agreed his partner, in whose deep violet eyes Ezio would quite happily have died.

‘Hmn. Technique’s not quite what it might be,’ commented one of the other men.

‘Oh, Murad, you are such a pedant. Think of the expression! That’s the main thing.’

‘He plays almost as well as he dresses,’ said a second woman, eyeing him.

‘A sound as beautiful as rainfall,’ said a third.

‘Indeed, the Italian lute is every bit as lovely as our oud,’ conceded Murad, pulling his partner away from Ezio. ‘But now, alas, we must mingle.’

‘*Tesekkür ederim, efendim*,’ the women chirruped as they departed.

Ezio, his credentials confirmed, was left unmolested by the guards from now on, and was able to make contact with Yusuf and his team.

‘Brilliant, Mentor,’ said Yusuf, when they’d made contact. ‘But don’t be seen talking to us – it’ll look suspicious. Try to make your way to the second courtyard – the inner one – through there. I’ll join you.’

‘Good thinking,’ Ezio agreed. ‘But what may we expect there?’

‘The inner circle. The entourage of the Prince. And, if we are fortunate, Suleiman himself. But be on your guard, Mentor. There may be danger there too.’

30

It was considerably quieter in the second courtyard, but the decorations, the food and drink, and the quality of both music and art, were just that little bit more splendid.

Ezio and Yusuf, keeping in the background, scanned the guests.

'I do not see Prince Suleiman,' Yusuf said.

'Wait!' Ezio warned him.

The orchestra struck up a fanfare, and the guests all turned expectantly towards a gateway in the centre of the rear wall of the courtyard, draped with rich hangings. Costly silk Isfahan carpets were spread on the ground in front of it. Moments later, a small group of people emerged, clustered around the two men who led them – each clad in suits of white silk, their turbans stuck one with diamond pins, the other with emeralds. Ezio's eyes were drawn to the younger of these, and his lips parted as he recognized him.

'The young man?' he asked his companion.

'That is Prince Suleiman,' Yusuf told him. 'Sultan Bayezid's grandson, and Governor of Kefe. And he's only seventeen.'

Ezio was amused. 'I met him on the ship, on the way here. He told *me* he was a student.'

'I've heard that he likes to travel incognito. It's also a security measure. He was returning from the *hajj*.'

'Who is the other man? The one with emeralds in his turban?'

'His uncle, Prince Ahmet. The Sultan's favoured son. He is grooming himself for the succession as we speak.'

The two princes stood as favoured guests were presented to them. Then they accepted glasses of ruby-coloured liquid.

'Wine?' asked Ezio.

'Cranberry juice.'

'*Serefe! Sagliginiza!*' Ahmet said, raising his voice with his glass, toasting the assembly.

After the formal toasts, Yusuf and Ezio continued to watch, as both guests and hosts became more relaxed, though as Suleiman mingled, Ezio noticed that his

guards were discreetly but continually attentive. These guards were tall, and none of them looked Turkish. They wore a distinctive uniform of white robes, and their headgear was a high, white, tapering cap, like that of a dervish. All, equally, wore moustaches. None was either clean-shaven or had a beard. Ezio knew enough about Ottoman custom to realize that this meant they had the status of slaves. Were they some kind of private bodyguard?

Suddenly, Yusuf caught Ezio's arm. 'Look! That man over there!'

A thin, pale young man with fine, light-coloured hair and dark brown, expressionless eyes had sidled up close to Suleiman. He was expensively dressed and might have been a prosperous Serbian arms dealer, at any rate someone important enough to have made it onto the guest list for the second courtyard. As Ezio quickly scanned the crowd, he saw four more elegantly dressed men, none of them Turks, by their looks, taking up what could only be backup positions, and discreetly signalling to one another.

Before Yusuf or Ezio could react, the thin young man, by now at Suleiman's elbow, had, with the speed of light, drawn a thin, curved *janbiyah*, and was plunging it down towards the prince's chest. At the same instant, the closest guard to him noticed and sprang into the blade's path.

There was instantaneous chaos and confusion. Guests were pushed roughly aside as guards ran to assist both princes and their fallen comrade, while the five Templar would-be killers tried to make their escape through the crowd now milling around in uproar and panic. The thin young man had vanished, but the guards had identified his companions and were pursuing them systematically, the Byzantine plotters using the confused and disoriented guests as obstacles to put between them and their hunters. Exits were sealed, but the conspirators attempted to climb out of the courtyard. In the confusion Prince Ahmet had disappeared and Prince Suleiman had been left isolated. Ezio saw that he had drawn a small dagger, but calmly stood his ground.

'Ezio!' Yusuf suddenly hissed. 'Look there!'

Ezio followed the direction Yusuf was pointing and saw that the thin young man had returned. Now, breaking out of the crowd behind the prince, he was closing on him, his weapon poised.

Ezio was far closer than Yusuf and realized that only he could save the prince in time. But he had no weapon himself! Then he looked down at the lute which he was still holding in his hands and, with a grunt of regret, made his decision, and smashed it against a nearby column. It shattered, but left him with a sharp shard of spruce wood in his hand. In an instant, Ezio sprang forward, seizing the Byzantine by his bony wrist and forcing him backwards and, just as he was in the act of moving in for the kill, drove the shard four inches deep into the man's

left eye. The Byzantine stopped as if he had been frozen, then the *janbiyah* fell from his hand and clattered onto the marble floor. He crumpled to the ground immediately afterwards.

The crowd fell silent, forming a circle around Ezio and Suleiman at a respectful distance. The guards tried to intervene, but Suleiman stayed them with a gesture.

The prince sheathed his own dagger, and took a small breath. Then he took a step towards Ezio – a signal honour from a prince, which the crowd acknowledged with a gasp.

'It is good to see you again, *mio bel menestrello*. Did I say that right?'

'My handsome minstrel. Very good.'

'It is a pity about your lute. So much more beautiful an instrument than a sword.'

'You are right, but it does not save lives.'

'Some would argue with that.'

'Perhaps. In other circumstances.' The two men exchanged a smile. 'I hear you are a Governor as well as a Prince. Is there anything you do not do?'

'I do not talk to strangers.' Suleiman bowed – a slight inclination of the head only. 'I am Suleiman Osman.'

'Auditore, Ezio.' Ezio bowed in his turn.

One of the white-clad guards approached then. A sergeant. 'Forgive me, my Prince. On behalf of your uncle, we must have your assurance that you are uninjured.'

'Where is he?'

'He awaits you.'

Suleiman looked at him coldly. 'Tell him that, thanks to this man, I *am* uninjured. But *no thanks* to you! You! The Janissaries! The elite guard, and you fail me, a prince of the royal house. Where is your captain?'

'Tarik Barleti is away – on an errand.'

'On an *errand*? Do you really wish to show yourselves such amateurs in front of this stranger?' Suleiman drew himself up as the guard, a muscular giant who must have weighed all of 300 pounds, trembled before him. 'Clear this body away and send the guests home. Then summon Tarik to the Divan!'

Turning back to Ezio as the man scuttled off, Suleiman said, 'This is embarrassing. The Janissaries are the bodyguard of the Sultan.'

'But not of his family?'

'On this occasion, it would appear not.' Suleiman paused, giving Ezio an appraising look. 'Now, I don't wish to impose on your time, but there is something I would like your opinion on. Something important.'

Yusuf was signalling to Ezio from the edge of the crowd now slowly dispersing.

‘Allow me simply the time to change out of this costume,’ Ezio said, nodding discreetly to his friend.

‘Very well. There’s something I need to arrange first in any case. Meet me by the Divan when you are ready. My attendants will escort you.’

He clapped his hands and departed the way he had come.

‘That was quite a performance,’ Yusuf said as they made their way out of the palace, in the company of two of Suleiman’s personal attendants. ‘But you’ve given us an introduction we would never have dreamt possible.’

‘The introduction.’ Ezio reminded him, ‘is mine.’

31

Suleiman was already waiting when Ezio joined him outside the Divan – the Council Chamber – of the palace, a short time later. The young man was looking composed, and alert.

‘I have arranged a meeting with my uncle, Prince Ahmet, and Captain Tarik Barleti,’ he announced without preamble. ‘There is something I should explain first. The Janissaries are loyal to my grandfather, but they have become angry over his choice for the next sultan.’

‘Ahmet.’

‘Exactly. The Janissaries favour my father, Selim.’

‘Hmn,’ said Ezio, considering. ‘You are in a tough spot. But tell me – how do the Byzantines fit into this?’

Suleiman shook his head. ‘I was hoping you might be able to give me some guidance on that. Would you be willing to help me find out?’

‘I am tracking them myself. As long as our interests do not conflict, it would be an honour to assist you.’

Suleiman smiled enigmatically. ‘Then I must accept what I can get.’ He paused. ‘Listen. There is a hatch at the top of the tower you see over there. Go up and lift the hatch. You will be able to see and hear everything that is said in the Divan.’

Ezio nodded, and immediately took his leave, while Suleiman turned and entered the Divan himself.

By the time Ezio had reached his vantage point, the discussion in the council chamber below him had already begun and was already becoming heated. The three men involved sat or stood around a long table, covered with Bergama carpets. Behind the table, a tapestry depicting Bayezid, flanked by his sons, hung on the wall.

Ahmet, a vigorous man in his mid-forties with short dark-brown hair and a full beard, bare-headed now and changed into rich garments of red, green and white, was in the middle of a tirade. ‘Heed my nephew, Tarik. Your

incompetence borders on treason. To think that today your Janissaries were outshone by an Italian lute-player! It is preposterous!'

Tarik Barleti, the lower half of his battle-scarred face lost in a grizzled beard, looked grim. 'An inexcusable failing, *efendim*. I will conduct a full investigation.'

Suleiman cut in. 'It is *I* who will conduct the investigation, Tarik. For reasons that should be obvious.'

Barleti nodded shortly. '*Evet, Shehzadem*. Clearly you have your father's wisdom.'

Ahmet shot the captain a furious glance at that, while Suleiman retorted, '*And* his impatience.' He turned to his uncle, his tone formal. '*Shehzad* Ahmet, I am at least relieved to see that you are safe.'

'Likewise, Suleiman. May God protect you.'

Suleiman, Ezio could see, was playing some kind of long game. As he watched, the young prince rose, and summoned his attendants.

'I will take my leave of you now,' he announced. 'And I will make my report on this disgraceful incident very soon, you may be sure of that.'

Accompanied by his retinue and guard, he strode from the Divan. Tarik Barleti was about to follow suit, but Prince Ahmet detained him.

'Tarik *bey* – a word?'

The soldier turned. Ahmet beckoned him to approach. His tone was cordial. Ezio had to strain to catch his words.

'What was the purpose of this attack, I wonder? To make me look weak? To make me appear an ineffective steward of this city?' He paused. 'If that was your plan, my dear Captain; if you had a hand in this mess, you have made a grave mistake! My father has chosen *me* as the next sultan, not my brother!'

Tarik did not answer immediately, his face expressionless, almost bored. At last he said, 'Prince Ahmet, I am not depraved enough to imagine the conspiracy you accuse me of.'

Ahmet took a step back, though his tone remained level and affable. 'What have I done to earn such contempt from the Janissary Corps? What has my brother done for you that I have not?'

Tarik hesitated, then said, 'May I speak freely?'

Ahmet spread his hands. 'You'd better, I think.'

Tarik faced him. 'You are weak, Ahmet. Pensive in times of war and restless in times of peace. You lack passion for the traditions of the *ghazi* – the Holy Warriors, and you speak of fraternity in the company of infidels.' He paused. 'You would make a decent philosopher, Ahmet, but you will be a poor sultan.'

Ahmet's face darkened. He snapped his fingers and his own bodyguard came to attention behind him.

'You may show yourself out,' he told the Janissary captain, and his voice was like ice.

Ezio was still watching, as, a few minutes later, Ahmet himself swept out of the Divan. A moment later, Ezio was joined by Prince Suleiman.

'Quite a family, eh?' said the prince. 'Don't worry. I was listening too.'

Ezio looked worried. 'Your uncle lacks sway over the very men he will soon command. Why did he not cut that man down where he stood for such insolence?'

'Tarik is a hard man,' replied the prince, spreading his hands. 'Capable, but ambitious. And he admires my father greatly.'

'But he failed to safeguard this palace against a Byzantine attempt on your life in its inner sanctum! That alone is worthy of investigation.'

'Precisely.'

'So – where should we begin?'

Suleiman considered. Ezio watched him. An old head on very young shoulders, he thought with renewed respect.

Suleiman said, 'For now, we'll keep an eye on Tarik and his Janissaries. They spend much of their free time in and around the Bazaar. Can you handle that – you and your … associates?' He phrased the last words delicately.

At the back of Ezio's mind was the memory of Yusuf's admonition not to get involved in Ottoman politics, but somehow his own quest and this power struggle looked connected. He made his decision.

'From now on, Prince Suleiman, none of them will purchase so much as a handkerchief without our knowledge.'

32

Having ensured that Yusuf and the Assassins of Constantinople were fully briefed in shadowing all movements of off-duty Janissaries in the Grand Bazaar, Ezio, accompanied by Azize, made his way down to the southern docks of the city to collect bomb-making materials from a list compiled for him by Piri Reis.

He had completed his purchases and dispatched them with Azize to the Assassins' headquarters in the city, when he noticed Sofia in the crowd thronging the quays. She was talking to a man who looked as if he might be an Italian, a man of about his own age. As he drew closer, he not only saw that she was looking more than a little discomfited, but recognized who she was talking to. Ezio was amused, but also not a little discomfited himself. The man's unexpected appearance evoked a number of memories and a number of conflicting emotions.

Without revealing his presence, Ezio drew closer.

It was Duccio Dovizi. Decades earlier, Ezio had come close to breaking his right arm, since Duccio had been two-timing Claudia, to whom he was engaged. The arm, Ezio noticed, still had a kink in it. Duccio himself had aged badly and looked haggard. But that clearly hadn't cramped his style. He was evidently smitten by Sofia, and was pestering her for attention.

'*Mia cara*,' he was saying to her, 'the strings of Fate have drawn us together. Two Italians lost and alone in the Orient. Do you not feel the *magnetismo*?'

Sofia, bored and annoyed, replied: 'I feel many things, *Messer* – nausea, above all.'

With a sense of déjà vu, Ezio thought it was time to make his move. 'Is this man bothering you, Sofia?' he asked, approaching.

Duccio, fuming at this interruption, turned to face the newcomer. 'Excuse me, *Messer*, but the lady and I are …' He trailed off as he recognized Ezio. 'Ah! *Il diavolo* in person!' His left hand went involuntarily to his right arm. 'Stay back!'

'Duccio, what a pleasure to see you again.'

Duccio didn't reply, but stumbled away, tripping over the cobblestones as he did so, and crying, 'Run, *buona donna*! Run for your life!'

They watched him disappear along the jetty. There was an awkward pause.

‘Who was that?’

‘A dog,’ Ezio told her. ‘He was engaged to my sister, many years ago.’

‘And what happened?’

‘His *cazzo* was engaged to six others.’

‘You express yourself very candidly.’ Sofia sounded mildly surprised by Ezio’s use of the word ‘dick’, but not offended.

‘Forgive me.’ He paused for a moment, then asked, ‘What brings you to the docks?’

‘I took a break from the shop to collect a package, but the customs people here claim that the ship’s papers are not in order. So, I wait.’

Ezio glanced around the well-guarded harbour, getting a sense of its layout.

‘It’s such a bother,’ Sofia continued. ‘I could be here all day.’

‘Let me see what I can do,’ he said. ‘I know a few ways of bending the rules.’

‘Do you now? Well, I must say I admire your bravado.’

‘Leave it to me. I’ll meet you back at your shop.’

‘Well then,’ she rummaged in her bag, ‘here is the paperwork. The parcel is quite valuable. Please take care of it – if you manage to get it away from them.’

‘I will.’

‘Then – thank you.’ She smiled at him and made her way back towards the city.

Ezio watched her go for a moment, then made his way to the large wooden building which held the customs offices. Inside, there was a long counter and, behind it, shelves containing a large number of packages and parcels. Near the front of one of the lower shelves closest to the counter he could see a wooden map tube with a label attached to it: SOFIA SARTOR.

‘*Perfetto*,’ he said to himself.

‘May I help you?’ said a portly official, coming up to him.

‘Yes, if you please. I’ve come to collect that package over there.’ He pointed.

The clerk looked across. ‘Well, I’m afraid that’s out of the question! All those parcels and packages have been impounded pending paperwork clearance.’

‘And how long will that take?’

‘I wouldn’t like to say.’

‘Hours?’

The clerk pursed his lips.

‘Days?’

‘That all depends. Of course, for a consideration … something might be arranged.’

‘To hell with that!’

The clerk became less friendly. ‘Are you trying to impede me in my duties?’ he barked. ‘Get out of the way, old man! And don’t come back, if you know what’s good for you!’

Ezio swept him aside and bounded over the counter. He seized the wooden map tube and turned to leave. But the clerk was frantically blowing a whistle and several of his colleagues, some of them members of the heavily armed dockyard guard, responded instantly.

‘That man,’ yelped the clerk, ‘tried to bribe me, and when that failed he resorted to violence!’

Ezio took a stand on the counter as the customs men surged forward to grab him. Swinging the weighty wooden map tube round, he cracked a few skulls with it and leapt over the heads of the rest of them, running towards the exit and leaving confusion in his wake.

‘That’s the only way to deal with petty officialdom,’ he said to himself, contentedly. He had disappeared into the twisting labyrinth of streets north of the docks before his pursuers had had time to collect themselves. Without Sofia’s papers, which he still had safely stowed in his tunic, they’d never be able to trace her.

33

Towards noon, he entered the bookshop west of Hagia Sofia.

She looked up as he came in. The shelves were far more orderly now than they had been when he'd first visited. In the back room, he could see her worktable, with his map from the cisterns neatly laid out alongside a number of thick books of reference.

'*Salute*, Ezio,' she said. 'That was a lot quicker than I expected. Any luck?'

Ezio held up the wooden map tube and read from the label: 'Madamigella Sofia Sartor, libraia, Costantinopoli. Is that you?'

He handed her the tube with a smile. She took it gladly, then examined it closely, her face turning sour. 'Oh, no! Look at the damage! Did they use this to fight off pirates, do you suppose?'

Ezio shrugged, a little sheepishly. Sofia opened the tube and withdrew the map within. She inspected it. 'Well, so far, so good.'

Taking it over to a table, she spread it out carefully. It was a copy of a map of the world.

'Isn't it beautiful?' she said.

'Indeed.' Ezio stood next to her and they both pored over it.

'It's a print of a map by Martin Waldseemüller. It's still quite new – he only published four years ago. And look – here on the left! The new lands *Navigatore* Vespucci discovered and wrote about only four or five years before the map was drawn.'

'They work fast, these Germans,' said Ezio. 'I see he's named the new lands after Vespucci's Christian name – Amerigo.'

'America!'

'Yes … Poor Cristoforo Colombo. History has a strange way of unfolding.'

'What do you make of this body of water here?' She pointed to the oceans on the far side of North and South America. Ezio leant forward to look.

'A new ocean, perhaps? Most of the scholars I know claim the size of the globe has been underestimated.'

Sofia sounded wistful. 'It's incredible. The more we learn about the world, the less we seem to know.'

Quite taken with the thought, they both fell silent for a moment. Ezio considered the new century they were in – the sixteenth. And only near its beginning. What would unfold during it, he could only guess; he knew that, at his age, he would not see very much more of it. More discoveries, and more wars, no doubt. But essentially the same play repeating itself – and the same actors, only with different costumes and different props for each generation that swallows up the last, each thinking that it would be the one to do better.

'Well, you honoured your promise,' said Sofia. 'And here is mine fulfilled.'

She led the way to the inner room and picked up a piece of paper from the table. 'If I am correct, this should show you the location of the first book.'

Ezio took the paper from her and read what was on it.

'I must admit,' Sofia went on, 'my head is swimming at the prospect of actually seeing these books. They contain knowledge the world has lost and should have again.' She sat at the table and cupped her chin in her hands, daydreaming. 'Perhaps I could have a few copies printed to distribute myself. A small run of fifty or so … That should be enough.'

Ezio smiled, then laughed.

'What's there to laugh about?'

'Forgive me. It is a joy to see someone with a passion so personal and so noble. It is … inspiring.'

'Goodness,' she replied, a little embarrassed. 'Where is this coming from?'

Ezio held up the piece of paper. 'I intend to go and investigate this immediately,' he said. '*Grazie*, Sofia – I will return soon.'

'I'll look forward to that,' she replied, watching him go with a mixture of puzzlement and concern.

What a mysterious man, she thought, as the door closed after him and she returned to the Waldseemüller map, and her own dreams of the future.

34

Sofia's calculations had been correct. Hidden behind a wooden panel in an old, deserted building in the Constantine District of the city, Ezio found the book he was looking for.

It was an ancient but well-preserved copy of *On Nature*, the poem written over 2000 years earlier by the Greek philosopher Empedocles outlining the sum of his thoughts.

Ezio lifted the book from its hiding place and blew the dust from the small volume. Then he opened it to a blank page at its front. As he watched, the page began to glow and, within the glow, a map of Constantinople revealed itself. As he looked more closely and concentrated, he discerned a pinpoint on the map. It showed the Maiden Tower, the lighthouse on the far side of the Bosphorus, as Ezio peered closer still, a precise spot within the cellars built into its foundations.

If all went well, this would be the location of the second key to Altaïr's library at Masyaf.

He made his way in haste through the teeming city to the Maiden Tower. Slipping past the Ottoman guards, and crossing over in a 'borrowed' boat, he saw a doorway from which steps led downwards into the cellars. He held the book in his hand and found that it was guiding him through a maze of corridors lined with innumerable doorways. It didn't seem possible that there could be so many in such a relatively confined space. But at last he came to a door, identical to all the others, but through whose cracks a faint light seemed to emanate. The door opened at his touch, and there, on a low stone plinth before him, a circular stone was placed, slim as a discus, and, like the first he had discovered, covered with strange symbols, as mysterious as the first set, but different. The form of a woman – a goddess, perhaps – who looked vaguely familiar, indentations which might either have been formulae, or possibly notches which might slot into pegs – maybe pegs within the keyholes in the library door at Masyaf.

As Ezio took the key in his hands, the light coming from it grew and grew, and he braced himself to be transported – he knew not where – as it engulfed

him, and whirled him back down centuries. Down 320 years. To the Year of Our Lord, 1191.

Masyaf.

Within the fortress, a time long ago.

Figures in a swirling mist. Emerging from it, a young man and an old. Evidence of a fight, which the old man – Al Mualim – had lost.

He lay on the ground, the young man knelt astride him.

His hand, losing its strength, let go of something which rolled from his grasp and came to rest on the marble floor.

Ezio drew in a breath as he recognized the object – it was, surely – the Apple of Eden. But how? And the young man – the victor – in white, his cowl drawn over his head, was Altaïr.

'You held fire in your hand, old man,' he was saying. 'It should have been destroyed.'

'Destroyed?' Al Mualim laughed. 'The only thing capable of ending the Crusades and creating true peace? Never.'

'Then I will destroy it.'

The images faded, dissolved, like ghosts, only for another scene to replace them.

Within the Great Keep at Masyaf, Altaïr stood alone with one of his captains. Near them, laid out in honour on a stone bier, lay the body of Al Mualim, peaceful now in death.

'Is it truly over?' the Assassin captain was saying. 'Is that sorcerer dead?'

Altaïr turned to look at the body. He spoke calmly, levelly, 'He was no sorcerer. Just an ordinary man, in command of – illusions.'

He turned back to his comrade. 'Have you prepared the pyre?'

'I have.' The man hesitated. 'But, Altaïr, some of the men … they will not stand for such a thing. They are restive.'

Altaïr bent over the bier. He stooped, and took the old man's body in his arms. 'Let me handle it.' He stood erect, his robes flowing about him. 'Are you fit to travel?' he asked the captain.

'Well enough, yes.'

'I have asked Malik al-Sayf to ride to Jerusalem with the news of Al Mualim's death. Will you ride to Acre and do the same?'

'Of course.'

'Then go, and God be with you.'

The captain inclined his head and departed.

Bearing the dead Mentor's body in his arms, his successor strode out to confront his fellow members of the Brotherhood.

At his appearance, there was an immediate babble of voices, reflecting the bewilderment in their minds. Some asked themselves if they were dreaming. Others were aghast at this physical confirmation of Al Mualim's passing.

'Altaïr! Explain yourself!'

'How did it come to this?'

'What has happened?'

One Assassin shook his head. 'My mind was clear, but my body … it would not move!'

In the midst of the confusion, Abbas appeared. Abbas. Altaïr's childhood friend. Now, that friendship was far less sure. Too much had happened between them.

'What has happened here?' asked Abbas, his voice reflecting his shock.

'Our Mentor has deceived us all,' Altaïr replied. 'The Templars corrupted him.'

'Where is your proof of that?' Abbas responded, suspiciously.

'Walk with me, Abbas; and I will explain.'

'And if I find your answers wanting?'

'Then I will talk until you are satisfied.'

They made their way, Altaïr still bearing Al Mualim's body in his arms, towards the funeral pyre which had been prepared for it. Beside him, Abbas, unaware of their destination, remained testy, tense and combative, unable to disguise his mistrust of Altaïr.

And Altaïr knew with what reason, and regretted it. But he would do his best.

'Do you remember, Abbas, the artefact we recovered from the Templar Robert de Sable, in Solomon's Temple?'

'You mean the artefact *you* were sent to retrieve, but *others* actually delivered?'

Altaïr let that go. 'Yes. It is a Templar tool. It is called the Apple of Eden. Among many other powers, it can conjure illusions and control the minds of men – and of the man who thinks *he* controls *it*. A deadly weapon.'

Abbas shrugged. 'Then better, surely, that we have it than the Templars.'

Altaïr shook his head. 'That makes no difference. It seems to corrupt all who wield it.'

'And you believe that Al Mualim fell under its spell?'

Altaïr made a gesture of impatience. 'I do. Today he used the Apple in an attempt to enslave Masyaf. You saw that for yourself.'

Abbas looked doubtful. 'I do not know *what* I saw.'

‘Listen, Abbas. The Apple is safe in Al Mualim’s study. When I am finished here, I will show you all I know.’

They had arrived at the pyre, and Altaïr ascended the steps to it, placing the body of his late Mentor reverently at its top. As he did so, Abbas looked aghast. It was his first sight of the pyre.

‘I cannot believe you really intend to go through with this!’ he said in a shocked voice. Behind him, the assembled Brotherhood of the Assassins rippled like corn in a breeze.

‘I must do what I must do,’ Altaïr replied.

‘No!’

But Altaïr had already taken one of the torches that stood ready lit by the pyre, and thrust it into the base of the woodpile. ‘I must know that he *cannot return*.’

‘But this is not our way! To burn a man’s body is forbidden!’

A voice from the crowd behind him cried out suddenly, in rage, ‘Defiler!’

Altaïr turned to face the restive crowd below him. ‘Hear me out! This corpse could be just another one of Al Mualim’s *phantom* bodies. I *must* be certain!’

‘Lies!’ Abbas yelled. As the flames took hold on the pyre, he stepped in close to Altaïr’s side, raising his voice so all could hear him. ‘All your life you have made a mockery of our Creed! You bend the rules to suit your whims, while belittling and humiliating those around you!’

‘Restrain Altaïr!’ yelled an Assassin in the crowd.

‘Did you not hear what he said?’ a comrade next to him responded. ‘Al Mualim was bewitched!’

The first Assassin’s reply was to fly out with his fists. A general fight ensued which escalated as rapidly as the flames rose.

On the ledge next to Altaïr, Abbas pushed him violently down from it, into the midst of the melee. As Abbas furiously made his way back to the castle, Altaïr struggled to find his feet among his clashing fellow Assassins, now with their swords drawn. ‘Brothers!’ he shouted, striving to restore order. ‘Stop! Stay your blades!’ But the fight continued, and Altaïr, who had just risen to his feet in time to see Abbas returning to the fortress, was forced to struggle amongst his own men, disarming them where he could, and exhorting them to desist. He did not know for how long he battled, but the strife was suddenly interrupted by a searing flash of light, which caused the combatants to stagger back, shielding their eyes.

The light came from the direction of the castle.

Altaïr’s worst fears were realized.

There, on the parapet of a tall tower, stood Abbas, and the Apple was in his hand.

‘What did I tell you, Altaïr?’ Abbas yelled down to him.

‘Abbas! Stop!’

‘What did you think would happen when you murdered our beloved Mentor?’

‘You loved Al Mualim less than anyone! You blamed him for all your misfortune, even your father’s suicide!’

‘My father was a *hero*!’ Abbas screamed defiantly.

Altaïr ignored him and turned hastily to the Assassins grouped questioningly round him.

‘Listen!’ he told them. ‘This is not the time to quarrel over what’s been done. We must decide now what is to be done with *that weapon*!’ He pointed to where Abbas was standing, holding the Apple aloft.

‘Whatever this artefact is capable of, Altaïr,’ he cried, ‘you are not worthy to wield it!’

‘No man is!’ Altaïr hurled back.

But Abbas was already staring into the Apple’s glow. The light, as he looked, intensified. He seemed mesmerized. ‘It is beautiful, is it not?’ he said, only just loudly enough to be heard.

Then a change came over him. His expression was transformed from a smile of amused triumph to a grimace of horror. He began to shake violently, as the power of the Apple swept into him, taking him over. Assassins still sympathetic to him were running to his aid, when the unearthly instrument he still held in his hand threw out an all but visible pulse wave, which threw them savagely to their knees, clutching their heads in agony.

Altaïr raced towards Abbas, scaling the tower with supernatural speed, driven by desperation. *He had to get there in time!* As he approached his former friend, Abbas began to scream as if his very soul was being ripped out of him. Altaïr made one final leap forward, disabling Abbas and knocking him down. Abbas crumpled to the ground with a despairing cry, as the Apple tumbled from his grasp, sending a final violent shockwave out from the tower as it did so.

Then there was silence.

The Assassins spread out below gradually pulled themselves together and got to their feet. They looked at one another in wonderment. What had happened continued to resound in their bodies and their minds. They looked up to the ramparts. Neither Altaïr nor Abbas was visible.

‘What was that?’

‘Are they dead?’

And then Altaïr appeared alone on the parapet of the tower. The wind blew his white robes about him. He raised his hand. In it, secure, was the Apple. It crackled and pulsated like a living thing, but it was under his control.

‘Forgive me,’ Abbas was gasping from the flagstone floor behind him. He could barely form the words. ‘I did not *know*.’

Altaïr turned his gaze back from the man to the Apple resting in his hand. It sent curious sensations, like shocks, the length of his extended arm.

‘Have you anything to teach us?’ said Altaïr, addressing the Apple as if it were a sensate thing. ‘Or will you lead us all to ruin?’

The wind then seemed to blow up a dust storm – or was it the return of the swirling fumes of cloud that had heralded this vision? With it came the blinding light which had preceded it, growing and growing until all else was blotted out. And then it dimmed once more, until there was just the gentle glow of the key in Ezio’s hand.

Exhausted, Ezio lowered himself to the floor and rested his back against the stone wall of the chamber. Outside, dusk would be falling. He longed for rest but could afford none.

After a long moment, he raised himself again and, carefully stowing both the key and the copy of Empedocles in his satchel, made his way to the streets above.

35

At dawn the next day, Ezio made his way to the Grand Bazaar. It was time he saw for himself what talk there might be among the Janissaries, and he was impatient to be on the trail of their captain, Tarik Barleti. But it was impossible, once there, entirely to avoid the importunate traders, who were all past masters of the hard sell. Ezio had to pass himself off as just another tourist for fear of arousing suspicion either among Ottoman officials or Byzantine Templars.

'You see this rug!' A merchant accosted him, plucking at his sleeve and, as Ezio had found to be the case so often here, getting too close to him, invading his body space. 'Your feet will love you more than your wife does!'

'I am not married.'

'Ah,' continued the merchant, seamlessly, 'you are better off. Come! Just feel it!'

Ezio noticed a group of Janissaries standing not far away. 'You have sold well today?' he asked the merchant.

The man spread his hands, nodding to his right at the Janissaries. 'I have not sold a thing! The Janissaries confiscated most of my stock, just because it was imported.'

'Do you know Tarik Barleti, their captain?'

'Eh, he's around here somewhere, no doubt. An arrogant man, but—' The merchant was about to go on, but interrupted himself, freezing up before reverting to his sales patter, his eyes focused not on Ezio, but well beyond him. 'You insult me, sir! I cannot take less than 200 *akçe* for this! That is my final offer.'

Ezio turned slightly, and followed the man's gaze. Three Janissaries were approaching, not fifty feet away.

'When I find him, I will ask him about your rugs,' Ezio promised the merchant quietly, as he turned to go.

'You drive a hard bargain, stranger!' the merchant called after him. 'Shall we compromise at 180? A hundred and eighty *akçe*, and we part as friends!'

But Ezio was no longer listening. He was following the group, shadowing them at a safe distance, hoping they might lead him to Tarik Barleti. They were

not walking idly – they had the look of men going to some kind of appointment. But he had to be vigilant – not only to keep his quarry in sight, but to avoid detection himself, and the crowded lanes of the souk both helped and hindered him in this. The merchant had said the captain would be somewhere in the Bazaar, but the Bazaar was a big place – a confusing labyrinth of stalls and shops, a small city in itself.

But at length his patience paid off, and the men he was following arrived at a crossroads in the lanes which broadened out into a little square with a coffee shop on each corner. In front of one stood the big captain with the grizzled beard. The beard was as much a mark of his rank as his resplendent uniform. He was clearly no slave.

Ezio crept as close as he could, to hear what was being said.

'Are you ready?' he asked his men, and they nodded their assent. 'This is an important meeting. Make sure I am not being followed.'

They nodded again and split up, disappearing into the Bazaar in different directions. Ezio knew they would be looking for any sign of an Assassin in the crowds, and for one heart-stopping moment one of the soldiers seemed to catch his eye, but then the moment passed and the man was gone. Waiting as long as he dared, he set off in pursuit of the captain.

Barleti hadn't gone far before he came to another Janissary, a lieutenant, who to the casual eye would have just seemed to be window-shopping in front of an armourer's establishment. Ezio had already noticed that Janissaries were the only people not to be badgered by the traders.

'What news?' Barleti said, as he drew level with the soldier.

'Manuel has agreed to meet you, Tarik. He's waiting by the Arsenal Gate.'

Ezio pricked up his ears at the name.

'An eager old weasel, isn't he?' Tarik said flatly. 'Come.'

They set off, out of the Bazaar and into the city streets. It was a long way to the Arsenal, which was situated on the north side of the Golden Horn further to the west, but they showed no sign of taking any kind of transport, and Ezio followed them on foot. A matter of a couple of miles – he would have to be careful when they took the ferry across the Horn. But his task was made easier by the fact that the two men were engrossed in conversation, most of which Ezio managed to catch. It was not hard to blend in, in these streets crowded with people from all over Europe and Asia.

'How did Manuel look? Was he nervous? Or cagey?' Tarik asked.

'He was his usual self. Impatient and discourteous.'

'Hmn. I suppose he has earned that right. Have there been dispatches from the Sultan?'

‘The last news was a week ago. Bayezid’s letter was short, and full of sad tidings.’

Tarik shook his head. ‘I could not imagine being at such odds with my own son.’

36

Ezio followed the two Janissaries to a building close by the Arsenal Gates. Waiting for Tarik and his lieutenant was a large, plump, expensively dressed man in his late fifties, sporting a full grey beard and waxed moustaches. His feathered turban was encrusted with jewels, and there was a jewelled ring on each of his podgy fingers. His companion was thinner, sparely built, and, to judge from his dress, hailed from Turkmenistan.

Ezio, having selected a suitable place to make himself invisible, hiding himself discreetly among the heavy branches of a tamarind tree which grew nearby, paid close attention as preliminary greetings were exchanged, and learned that the plump dandy was – as he'd suspected – Manuel Palaiologos. Given what he'd heard from Yusuf about Manuel's ambitions, this meeting would be an interesting one to listen in on. Palaiologos' companion, also his bodyguard, as became apparent as the introductions were made, went by the name of Shahkulu.

Ezio had heard of him. Shahkulu was a rebel against the Ottoman rulers of his country, and the rumours were that he was fomenting revolution among his people. But he also had a reputation for extreme cruelty and banditry.

Yes, this meeting would indeed be interesting.

Once the niceties – always elaborate, in this country, Ezio had noticed – had been dealt with, Manuel gestured to Shahkulu, who entered the building behind them – a kind of guard post, now evidently deserted – and from it brought a small, but heavy, wooden chest, which he placed at Tarik's feet. The Janissary lieutenant opened it and began counting the gold coins with which it was filled.

'You may verify the amount, Tarik,' Manuel said in a voice as plummy as his body. 'But the money stays with me until I have seen the cargo for myself, and ascertained its quality.'

Tarik grunted. 'Understood. You are a shrewd man, Manuel.'

'Trust without cynicism is hollow,' intoned Palaiologos, unctuously.

The Janissary had been counting fast. Soon afterwards, he closed the chest. 'The count is good, Tarik,' he said. 'It's all here.'

'So,' said Manuel to Tarik. 'What now?'

‘You will have access to the Arsenal. When you are satisfied, the cargo will be delivered to a location of your choosing.’

‘Are your men prepared to travel?’

‘Not a problem.’

‘*Poi kalà*,’ the Byzantine princeling relaxed a little. ‘Very good. I will have a map drawn up for you within a week.’

They parted company then, and Ezio waited until the coast was clear before he climbed down the tree and made his way with all possible haste to the Assassins’ headquarters.

37

It was dusk when Ezio returned to the Arsenal, and found Yusuf already there waiting for him.

‘One of my men claims he saw a shipment of weapons brought in here earlier. So we got curious.’

Ezio pondered this. It was as he had suspected. ‘Weapons.’ He paused. ‘I would like to see them for myself.’

He scanned the outer walls of the Arsenal. They were well guarded. The main gate looked impregnable.

‘Short of killing everyone in sight,’ Yusuf said, following his Mentor’s thoughts, ‘I’m not sure how you will get inside.’

The square behind them was still teeming with life – people hurrying home after work, coffee bars and restaurants opening their doors. Suddenly their attention was drawn to an altercation which had broken out near the main gate in the Arsenal walls between a trader and three Janissaries, who were harassing him.

‘You have been warned twice,’ one of the Janissaries, a sergeant, was saying. ‘No merchants near the Arsenal walls!’ He turned to his men. ‘Take this stuff away!’

The privates started to pick up the trader’s crates of fruit and carry them away.

‘Hypocrites!’ the man grumbled. ‘If your men didn’t buy my produce, I wouldn’t be selling it here in the first place!’

The sergeant ignored him and the soldiers went on with their work, but the trader hadn’t finished. He went right up to the sergeant and said, ‘You are worse than the Byzantines, you traitor!’

By way of reply, the Janissary sergeant whacked him with a hard fist. He collapsed, groaning, holding his bleeding nose.

‘Hold your tongue, parasite!’ growled the sergeant.

He turned away to supervise the continuing confiscation of the fruit, while a woman from the crowd rushed up to help the injured trader. Yusuf and Ezio watched as she assisted him to his feet, staunching his bloody face with a handkerchief.

‘Even in times of peace,’ said Yusuf grimly, ‘the poor are always under siege.’

Ezio was thoughtful, thinking of similar circumstances in Rome not so long ago. ‘Perhaps if we inspire them to vent their anger, that will help our cause.’

Yusuf looked at him. ‘You mean – recruit these people? Incite them to rebel?’

‘It need only be a demonstration. But, with enough of them on our side …’

The two men watched as the Janissaries, unimpeded, proceeded to carry off what was left of the man’s stock, leaving his stall completely bare. They disappeared through a wicket in the main gate.

‘Feigning solidarity to push your own agenda,’ said Yusuf, with a hint of contempt. ‘What a gentleman!’

‘It’s not pretty, I know. But it will work, believe me.’

‘*Whatever* works.’ Yusuf shrugged. ‘And I see no other way of effecting a break-in here.’

‘Come – there’s a big crowd here, and it looks as if that trader is pretty popular. Let’s go and do some canvassing among the people.’

For the next half an hour and more, Ezio and Yusuf worked the crowd, hinting and persuading, cajoling and inspiring the ordinary working people around them, whom they found to be very biddable to the idea of putting an end to their oppression. All they had needed, it seemed, was someone to fire them up. Once a sufficient number had gathered into a mob, Ezio addressed them. The fruit trader stood by his side, defiant now. Yusuf had seen to it that most of the men and women had armed themselves in one way and another. The fruit trader held a large curved pruning knife.

‘Fight with us, brothers,’ Ezio declaimed, ‘and avenge this injustice. The Janissaries are not above the law! Let’s show them we won’t stand for their tyranny.’

‘Yes!’ several voices roared.

‘It makes me sick to see the kind of abuse they hand out,’ Ezio continued. ‘Doesn’t it you?’

‘Yes!!’

‘Will you fight with us?’

‘Yes!!!’

‘Then – let’s go!’

By now, a detachment of armed Janissaries had issued forth from the Arsenal gate, which was firmly closed behind them. They took up positions in front of it, swords drawn, and faced the mob, whose mood had reached boiling-point. Undaunted by the soldiers’ show of strength – indeed, incensed by it – the crowd, whose volume grew by the minute, surged forwards towards the gate. Whenever a Janissary was rash enough to close with people in the front rank, he

was overcome by the sheer weight of numbers and either hurled aside or crushed under advancing feet. Soon afterwards, the crowd was milling about at the gate itself, with Ezio and Yusuf keeping just enough command to direct their improvised strike-force to batter it open.

‘Down with the Janissaries!’ shouted a hundred voices.

‘You are not above the law!’ yelled a hundred more.

‘Open the gate, you coward, before we tear it down!’

‘That gate won’t stay closed for long,’ said Ezio to Yusuf.

‘The people are doing you a favour, Mentor. Return it, and keep them safe from harm.’

As Yusuf spoke, two detachments of Janissary reinforcements bore down on the crowd from right and left, having emerged from side gates in the north and south walls.

‘This calls for close fighting.’ Ezio said as, accompanied by Yusuf, he unleashed his hookblade and his hidden blade, and threw himself into the fray.

Encouraged by the professional skills of the two Assassins, the men and women on each flank of the crowd turned bravely to face the Janissary counter-attack. As for the Janissaries, they were taken aback to encounter such firm resistance from such an unexpected quarter, and they hesitated – fatally – and were repulsed. In the meantime, those working on the gate were rewarded to see the firm planks of its doors first groan, then give, then buckle, then smash. With a mighty crack the main crossbeam holding the gate shut from within, snapped like matchwood, and the gate fell back, its doors hanging drunkenly from its massive iron hinges.

The crowd roared with one voice, like a great triumphant beast, and as they poured into the Arsenal, individual voices could be heard raised above the rest:

‘Push through!’

‘We’re inside!’

‘Justice or death!’

The defending Janissaries within were powerless to prevent the onrush, but with their greater discipline managed to hold it in check as ferocious fighting broke out in the Arsenal’s main quadrangle. Through it all, Ezio slipped like a wraith, into the inner confines of the fortress-like edifice.

38

Far from the shattered gate, deep within the western sector of the Arsenal, Ezio came at last to the place he was looking for. It was quiet here, for most of the fighting men in the Arsenal garrison were engaged in the quadrangle, and the handful of guards he did encounter, if he could not slip past them unnoticed, he swiftly despatched. He would have to sharpen his hookblade once his work here was done.

He made his way down a long stone corridor, so narrow that no one could enter the chamber at its end with any hope of surprising those within. Ezio approached slowly, soft-footed, until he came to an iron ladder fixed to the wall near the chamber's entrance, which led to a gallery overlooking it. Strapping his sword scabbard to his leg so that it would not clatter, he climbed up swiftly and with as little noise as a flower makes when it opens. From his vantage point, he stared grimly at the scene taking place below him.

Manuel and Shahkulu stood in the middle of the chamber, surrounded by a jumble of large crates, some of them open. A small Janissary guard unit stood at attention just inside the door. If Ezio had tried to enter, he would have fallen victim to an ambush. Softly, he breathed a sigh of relief. His instincts and experience had saved him, this time.

Manuel paused in his examination of the contents of the crates. The angle of vision available to Ezio did not allow him to see what they were, though he could guess.

'Twenty years in this city, living like a cipher,' Manuel was saying, 'and now, at last, everything is falling into place.'

Shahkulu replied, a note of menace in his voice, 'When the Palaiologos line is restored, Manuel, do not forget who it was that helped you bring it back.'

Manuel looked at him keenly, his small eyes glittering coldly amidst the folds of flesh. 'Of course not, my friend! I would not dream of betraying a man of your influence. But you must be patient. *Nova Roma* was not built in a day!'

Shahkulu grunted noncommittally, and Manuel turned to the captain of his escort. 'I am satisfied. Take me to my ship.'

‘Follow me. There is a passage to the west gate by which we can avoid the fighting,’ said the captain.

‘I hope and expect you will soon have that under control.’

‘As we speak, Prince.’

‘If one single item here is damaged, the money stays with me. Tell Tarik that.’

Ezio watched them go. When he was satisfied that he was alone, he descended to the chamber and made a quick inspection of the crates, lifting the lid of one which had been unsealed.

Rifles. One hundred or more.

‘*Merda!*’ Ezio breathed.

His thoughts were interrupted by a brazen clang – surely the west gate banging shut after Manuel’s departure. Immediately afterwards, he heard the sound of boots on stone approaching. The Janissaries would be returning to reseal the opened crates. Ezio pressed himself against the wall and as the soldiers entered, cut them down. Five of them. If they’d been able to come in together, instead of one at a time, the story might have been different. But the narrow corridor had turned out to be his friend.

He went back the way he had come. In the quadrangle the battle was over, leaving the usual vile aftermath of combat. Ezio walked slowly past a sea of bodies, mostly still, some writhing in their last agonies. The only sound was the keening of women as they knelt by the fallen, in the pitiless wind that blew through the yawning gateway.

With his head bowed, Ezio strode from the place. The price paid for the knowledge he had gained seemed very high indeed.

39

It was high time to return to Sofia's bookshop. He hurried there straight away.

The shop was still open and lights within burned brightly. When she saw Ezio enter, Sofia took off her eyeglasses and got up from the worktable in the inner room, where the map he'd discovered in Yerebatan was spread out amid several open books.

'*Salute*,' she greeted him, closing the door behind him and pulling down the blinds. 'Time I closed for the day. Two customers all afternoon. I ask you? It's not worth staying open for the evening trade.' Then she saw the expression on Ezio's face and led him to a chair, where he sat heavily. She fetched him a glass of wine.

'*Grazie*,' he said gratefully, glad she didn't start asking questions.

'I'm closing in on two more books – one near Tokapi Saray and the other in the Bayezid District.'

'Let's try the Bayezid first. The Topkapi will be a dead end. It was there that the Templars discovered the key they have.'

'Ah – *sì*. They must have found it by chance or by other means than ours.'

'They had Niccolò's book.'

'Then we must thank the Mother of God that you rescued it from them before they could use it further.'

She returned to the map, seated herself before it, and resumed writing. Ezio leant forward, produced the copy of Empedocles and placed it on the table by her. The second key that he had found had already joined the first, under secure guard, at the Assassins' HQ in Galata.

'What do you make of this?' he said.

She picked it up carefully, turning it over reverently in her hands. Her hands were delicate but not bony and the fingers were long and slender.

Her jaw had dropped in wonder. 'Oh, Ezio! *È incredibile*! '

'Worth something?'

'A copy of *On Nature* in this condition? In its original Coptic binding? It's fantastic!' She opened it carefully. The coded map within no longer glowed. In fact, Ezio could see that it was no longer visible.

‘Amazing. This must be a third-century transcription of the original,’ Sofia was saying, enthusiastically. ‘I don’t suppose there’s another copy like this in existence.’

But Ezio’s eyes were restlessly scanning the room. Something had changed, and he could not yet put his finger on what it was. At last his gaze came to rest on a boarded-up window. The glass was gone from its panes.

‘Sofia,’ he said, concerned, ‘what happened here?’

Her voice took on an irritated tone, though clearly overridden by her excitement. ‘Oh, that happens once or twice a year. People try to break in, thinking they will find money.’ She paused. ‘I do not keep much here, but this time they succeeded, and made off with a portrait of some value. No more than three hours ago, when I was out of the shop for a short time.’ She looked sad. ‘A very good portrait of me, as it happens. I shall miss it, and not just for what it is worth. I’m certainly going to find a very safe place for *this*,’ she added, tapping the Empedocles.

Ezio was still suspicious that there might be more behind this painting theft than met the eye. He roamed through the room looking for any clues it might afford him. Then he came to a decision. He was rested enough for the moment and he owed this woman a favour. But there was more to it than that. He *wanted* to do whatever he could for her.

‘You keep working,’ he said. ‘I will find your painting for you.’

‘Ezio, the thief could be anywhere by now.’

‘If the thief came for money, found none, and took the portrait instead, he should still be in this district, close by, eager to get rid of it.’

Sofia looked thoughtful. ‘There are a couple of streets near here where a number of art dealers do business.’

Ezio was already halfway to the door.

‘Wait!’ she called after him. ‘I have some errands in that direction. I’ll show you the way.’

He waited as she locked *On Nature* carefully in an ironclad chest by one wall, then followed her as she left the shop, locking the door firmly behind her.

‘This way,’ she said. ‘But we part company at the first turning. I’ll point you in the right direction from there.’

They walked on in silence. A few dozen yards down the street, they came to a crossroads and she halted.

‘Down there,’ she said, pointing. Then she looked at him. There was something in her clear eyes which he hoped he wasn’t imagining.

‘If you happen to find it within the next couple of hours, please come and meet me by Valens’ Aqueduct,’ she said. ‘There’s a book fair I need to attend,

but I’d be so glad to see you there.’

‘I will do my best.’

She looked at him again, and then away, quickly.

‘I know you will,’ she said. ‘Thank you, Ezio.’

40

The picture dealers' quarter wasn't hard to find – a couple of narrow streets running parallel to one another, the little shops glowing in the lamplight which shone on the treasures they held.

Ezio passed slowly from one to another, looking at the people browsing the art more than the art itself. Before too long he saw a shifty-looking character in gaudy clothes coming out of one of the galleries, engrossed in counting out coins from a leather purse. Ezio approached him. The man was immediately on the defensive.

'What do you want?' he asked, nervously.

'Just made a sale, have you?'

The man drew himself up. 'If it's any business of yours—'

'Portrait of a lady?'

The man took a swipe at Ezio, and prepared to duck and run, but Ezio was a little too quick for him. He tripped him up and sent him sprawling. Coins scattered all over the cobbles.

'Pick them up and give them to me,' said Ezio.

'I have done nothing,' snarled the man, obeying nevertheless. 'You can't prove a damn thing!'

'I don't need to,' Ezio snarled back. 'I'll just keep hitting you until you talk.'

The man's tone changed to a whine. 'I found that painting. I mean – someone gave it to me.'

Ezio whacked him. 'Get your story straight before you lie to my face.'

'God help me!' the man wailed.

'He has much better things to do than answer your prayers.'

The thief finished his task and handed the full purse meekly to Ezio, who pulled him upright and pinned him to a nearby wall. 'I do not care how you got the painting,' said Ezio. Just tell me where it is.'

'I sold it to a merchant here. For a lousy 200 *akçe*.' The man's voice broke as he indicated the shop. 'How else will I feed myself?'

'Next time find a nicer way to be a *canaglia*.'

Ezio let the man go, and he scampered off down the lane, cursing. Ezio watched him for a moment, then made his way into the gallery.

He looked carefully among the pictures and sculptures on sale. It wasn't hard to spot what he was after because the gallery owner had just finished hanging it. It wasn't a large painting, but it was beautiful – a head and shoulders, three-quarter-profile portrait of Sofia, a few years younger, her hair in ringlets, wearing a necklace of jet and diamonds, a black ribbon tied to the left shoulder of her bronze satin dress. Ezio guessed it must have been done for the Sartor family when *Meister* Dürer was briefly resident in Venice.

The gallery owner, seeing him admiring it, came up to him. 'That's for sale, of course, if you like the look of it.' He stood back a little, sharing the treasure with his prospective client. 'A luminous portrait. You see how lifelike she looks. Her beauty shines through!'

'How much do you want for it?'

The gallery owner hummed and hawed. 'Hard to put a price on the priceless, isn't it?' He paused. 'But I can see you are a connoisseur. Shall we say … five hundred?'

'You paid two hundred.'

The man held up his hands, aghast. '*Efendim!* As if I would take such advantage of a man like you! In any case – how do you know?'

'I've just had a word with the vendor. Not five minutes ago.'

The gallery owner clearly saw that Ezio was not a man to be trifled with. 'Ah! Indeed. But I have my overheads, you know.'

'You've only just hung it. I watched you.'

The gallery owner looked distressed. 'Very well … four hundred, then?'

Ezio glared.

'Three hundred? Two fifty?'

Ezio placed the purse carefully in the man's hand. 'Two hundred. There it is. Count it if you like.'

'I'll have to wrap it.'

'I hope you don't expect extra for that.'

Grumbling sotto voce, the man unhooked the picture and wrapped it carefully in cotton sheeting which he drew from a bolt by the shop counter. Then he passed it to Ezio. 'A pleasure doing business with you,' he said, drily.

'Next time, don't be so eager to take stolen goods,' said Ezio. 'You might have had a customer who wanted the provenance on a painting as good as this one. Luckily for you, I'm prepared to overlook that.'

'And why, might one ask?'

'I'm a friend of the sitter.'

Flabbergasted, the gallery owner bowed him out of the shop, with as much haste as politeness permitted.

‘A pleasure doing business with you, too,’ said Ezio, aridly, in parting.

41

Unable to keep a rendezvous with Sofia that evening, Ezio sent her a note arranging to meet the following day at the Bayezid Mosque, where he would give her back the picture.

When he arrived, he found her already there, waiting for him. In the dappled sunlight, he thought her so beautiful that the portrait scarcely did her justice.

'It's a good likeness, don't you think?' she said, as he unwrapped it and handed it to her.

'I prefer the original.'

She elbowed him playfully. '*Buffone*,' she said, as they began walking. 'This was a gift from my father when we were in Venice for my twenty-eighth birthday.' She paused in reminiscence. 'I had to sit for *Messer* Albrecht Dürer for a full week. Can you imagine? Me sitting still for seven days? Doing nothing?'

'I cannot.'

'*Una tortura*! '

They stopped at a nearby bench and she sat down. Ezio suppressed a laugh at the thought of her posing, trying not to move a muscle, for all that time. But the result had certainly been worth it – even though he really *did* prefer the original.

The laughter died on his lips as she produced a slip of paper; his expression immediately became serious, as did hers.

'One good turn …' she said. 'I've found you another book location. It's not far from here, actually.'

She handed him the folded slip.

'*Grazie*,' he said. The woman was a genius. He nodded gravely to her, and made to go, but she stopped him with a question.

'Ezio – what is this all about? You're not a scholar, that much is clear.' She eyed his sword. 'No offence, of course!' She paused. 'Do you work for the Church?'

Ezio gave an amused laugh. 'Not the Church, no. But I am a teacher … of a kind.'

'What then?'

'I will explain one day, Sofia. When I can.'

She nodded, disappointed, but not – as he could see – actually devastated. She had sense enough to wait.

42

The decoded cipher led Ezio to an ancient edifice barely three blocks distant, in the centre of the Bayezid District. It seemed to have been a warehouse once, now in disuse, and looked securely shut, but the door, when he tried it, was unlocked. Cautiously, looking up and down the street for any sign of either Ottoman guards or Janissaries, he entered.

Following the instructions on the paper he held in his hand he climbed a staircase to the first floor, and went down a corridor, at the end of which he found a small room, an office, covered in dust; but its shelves were still full of ledgers, and on the desk lay a pen set and a paperknife. He examined the room carefully but its walls seemed to hold no clue at all about what he sought, until at last his keen eyes noticed a discrepancy in the tile work which surrounded the fireplace.

He explored this delicately with his fingers, finding that one tile moved under his touch. Using the paperknife from the desk, he dislodged it, listening all the time for the sound of any movement from below – though he was certain no one had noticed him enter the building. The tile came away after only a moment's work, revealing behind it a wooden panel. He removed this and saw in the faint light behind it a book, which he withdrew carefully. A small, very old book. He peered at the title on its spine: it was the version of Aesop's *Fables* put into verse by Socrates while he was under sentence of death.

He blew the dust from it, and expectantly opened it to a blank page at the front. There, as he had hoped, a map of Constantinople revealed itself. He scanned it carefully, patiently concentrating. And as the page glowed with an unearthly light, he could see that the Galata Tower was pinpointed on it. Stowing the book carefully in his belt-wallet, he left the building and made his way north through the city, taking the ferry across the Golden Horn to a quay near the foot of the tower.

He had to use all his blending-in skills to get past the guards, but, once inside, was guided by the book, which took him up a winding stone staircase to a landing between floors. It appeared to contain nothing beyond its bare stone walls. Ezio double-checked with the book, and verified that he was in the right

place. He searched the walls with his hands, feeling for any giveaway crevice which might indicate a hidden aperture, tensing at the sound of the slightest footfall on the stairway, but no one approached. At last he found a gap between the stonework which was not filled with mortar, and followed it with his fingers, disclosing what was a very narrow, concealed doorway.

A little more research led him to push gently against the surrounding stones until he found one about three feet from the floor which gave slightly, allowing the door to swing back. It revealed, within the depth of the tower's wall, a small room scarcely big enough to enter. Inside on a narrow column rested another circular stone key – his third. He squeezed into the space to retrieve it, and it began to glow, its light increasing quickly. The room in turn seemed to grow in volume, and Ezio felt himself transported to another time, another place.

As the light reduced to a normal brightness, the brightness of sunshine, Ezio saw Masyaf again. But time had moved on. In his heart Ezio knew that many years had passed. He had no idea whether or not he was dreaming. It seemed to be a dream, as he was not part of it; but at the same time, somehow, he was involved. As well as having the feeling of dreaming, the experience was also, in some way which Ezio could not define, like a memory.

Disembodied, at one with the scene which presented itself to him, yet no part of it, he watched, and waited … And there again was the young man in white, though no longer young; whole decades must have passed.

And his look was troubled …

43

After a long absence travelling in the east, Altaïr had returned to the seat of the Assassin Order. It was the Year of Our Lord 1228. Altaïr, now in his sixty-third year, but still a lean and vigorous man, sat on a stone bench outside a dwelling in the village of Masyaf, thinking. He was no stranger to adversity, and disaster seemed, once again, poised to strike. But he had kept the great, terrible artefact safe through it all. How much longer would his strength hold to do so? How much longer would his back refuse to buckle under the blows Destiny rained on it?

His ponderings were interrupted – and the interruption was not unwelcome – by the appearance of his wife, Maria Thorpe, the Englishwoman who had once – long ago – been his enemy, a woman who had longed to be counted amongst the Company of the Templars. Time and chance had changed all that. Now, after a long exile, they had returned to Masyaf and faced Fate together.

She joined him on the bench, sensing his lowered spirits. He told her his news.

‘The Templars have retaken their Archive on Cyprus. Abbas Sofian sent no reinforcements to aid the defenders. It was a massacre.’

Maria’s lips parted in an expression of surprise and dismay. ‘How could God have permitted this?’

‘Maria, listen to me. When we left Masyaf ten long years ago our Order was strong. But since then all our progress – all that we built – has been undone, dismantled.’

Her face was a mask of quiet fury. ‘Abbas must answer for this.’

‘Answer to whom?’ replied Altaïr, angrily. ‘The Assassins obey only *his* command now.’

She placed a hand on his arm. ‘Resist your desire for revenge, Altaïr. If you speak the truth, they will see the error of their ways.’

‘Abbas executed our youngest *son*, Maria! He deserves to *die*!’

‘Yes. But if you cannot win back the Brotherhood by honourable means, its foundation will crumble.’

Altaïr didn’t reply for a moment, but sat silently brooding on the subject of some deep inner struggle. But at last he looked up and his face had cleared.

‘You are right, Maria,’ he said, calmly. ‘Thirty years ago, I let passion overtake my reason. I was headstrong and ambitious, and I caused a rift within the Brotherhood which has never fully healed.’

He rose and Maria rose with him. Slowly, immersed in conversation, they walked through the dusty village.

‘Speak reasonably, Altaïr, and reasonable men will listen,’ she encouraged him.

‘Some will, perhaps. But not Abbas.’ Altaïr shook his head. ‘I should have expelled him thirty years ago when he tried to steal the Apple.’

‘But my dear, you earned the respect of the other Assassins, because you were merciful – you let him stay.’

He smiled at her slyly. ‘How do you know all this? You weren’t even there.’

She returned his smile. ‘I married a master storyteller,’ she replied, lightly.

As they walked, they came into view of the massive hulk of the castle. There was an air of neglect hanging over it, of desolation, even.

‘Look at this place,’ growled Altaïr. ‘Masyaf is a shadow of its former self.’

‘We have been away a long time,’ Maria reminded him, gently.

‘But not in hiding,’ he said, testily. ‘The threat from the Mongols – the Storm from the East, the hordes led by Khan Genghis – demanded our attention, and we rode to meet it. What man here can say the same?’

They walked on. A little later, Maria broke their silence by saying, ‘Where is our eldest son? Does Darim know that his brother is dead?’

‘I sent Darim a message four days ago. With luck, it will have reached him by now.’

‘Then we may see him soon.’

‘If God wills it.’ Altaïr paused. ‘You know when I think of Abbas, I almost pity him. He wears his great grudge against us like a cloak.’

‘His wound is deep, my darling. Perhaps … perhaps it will help him to hear the truth.’

But Altaïr shook his head. ‘It will not matter, not to him. A wounded heart sees all wisdom as the point of a knife.’ He paused again, looking around him at the handful of villagers who passed them with their eyes either lowered or averted. ‘As I walk through this village, I sense great fear in the people, not love.’

‘Abbas has taken this place apart and robbed it of all joy.’

Altaïr stopped in his tracks, and looked gravely at his wife. He searched her face, lined now but still beautiful, her eyes still clear, though he fancied he saw reflected in them all they had been through together. ‘We may be walking to our doom, Maria.’

She took his hand. ‘We may. But we walk together.’

44

Maria and Altaïr had reached the confines of the castle, and now began to encounter Assassins – members of the Brotherhood – who knew them. But the meetings were far from friendly. As one approached them and made to pass by without acknowledgement, Altaïr stopped him.

‘Brother. Speak with us a moment.’

Unwillingly, the Assassin turned. But his expression was stern. ‘For what reason should I speak with you? So that you can twist my mind into knots with that devilish artefact of yours?’

And he hurried away, refusing to talk any further.

But hard on his heels came another Assassin. He too, however, clearly wished to avoid any contact with the former Mentor and his wife.

‘Are you well, brother?’ asked Altaïr, accosting him, and there was something challenging in his tone.

‘Who is asking?’ he replied, rudely.

‘Do you not recognize me? I am Altaïr.’

He looked at him levelly. ‘That name has a hollow sound, and you – you are a cipher, nothing more. I would learn more talking to the wind.’

They made their way unchallenged to the castle gardens. Once there, they knew why they had been allowed to penetrate this far because they were suddenly surrounded by dark-clad Assassins, loyal to their usurping Mentor, Abbas, and they stood ready to strike at any moment. Then on a rampart above them Abbas himself appeared, sneeringly in control.

‘Let them speak,’ he ordered, in an imperious voice. To Altaïr and Maria, he said, ‘Why have you come here? Why have you returned, unwelcome as you are, to this place? To defile it further?’

‘We seek the truth about our son’s death,’ replied Altaïr in a calm, clear voice. ‘Why was Sef killed?’

‘Is it the truth you want, or an excuse for revenge?’ Abbas responded.

‘If the truth gives us an excuse, we will act on it,’ Maria threw back at him.

This retort gave Abbas pause, but after a moment’s reflection he said, in a lower tone, ‘Surrender the Apple, Altaïr, and I will tell you why your son was

put to death.'

Altaïr nodded as if at a secret insight and, turning, prepared to address the assembled Brotherhood of Assassins. He raised his voice commandingly, 'Ah, the truth is out already! Abbas wants the Apple for himself. Not to open your minds – but to control them!'

Abbas was quick to reply. 'You have held that artefact for thirty years, Altaïr, revelling in its power and hoarding its secrets. It has corrupted you!'

Altaïr looked around at the sea of faces, most set against him, some – a few – showing signs of doubt. His mind worked quickly as he concocted a plan which might just work.

'Very well, Abbas,' he said. 'Take it.'

And he took the Apple from the pouch at his side and held it up high.

'What … ?' said Maria, taken aback.

Abbas' eyes flashed at the sight of the Apple, but he hesitated before signalling to his bodyguard to go and take it from Altaïr's gaunt hand.

The bodyguard came close. When he was standing next to Altaïr, a demon possessed him and with an amused expression on his face, he leaned in to the former Mentor and whispered in his ear, 'It was I who executed your son Sef. Just before I killed him, I told him that it was you yourself who had ordered his death.' He did not see the flash of lightning in Altaïr's eyes. He blundered on, pleased with himself and scarcely restraining a laugh, 'Sef died believing you had betrayed him.'

Altaïr turned burning eyes on him then. In his hand, the Apple exploded with the light of a bursting star.

'Ahhhh!' screamed the bodyguard in pain. His whole body writhed uncontrollably. His hands went to his head, scrabbling at his temples. It looked as if he were trying to tear his head from his body in an attempt to stop the agony.

'Altaïr!' cried Maria.

But Altaïr was deaf to her. His eyes were black with fury. Driven by an unseen force the bodyguard, even as he tried to resist his own impulses, pulled a long knife from his belt and, with hands trembling as they tried to oppose the power which drove them, raised it ready to plunge it into his own throat.

Maria seized her husband's arm, shaking him and crying again, 'Altaïr! No!'

Her words had their effect at last. An instant later, visibly shaken, Altaïr broke free of the trance which had gripped him. His eyes became normal again and the Apple withdrew its light, becoming dark and dull, inert in his hand.

But the bodyguard, freed of the force which had held him in its grasp, shook himself like a dog, looked around madly, in anger and fear and, with a terrible

oath, threw himself on Maria, pushing his knife deep into her back. Then he drew back, leaving the knife buried where he had driven it. A faint cry formed on Maria's lips. The entire company of Assassins stood as if turned to stone. Abbas himself was silent, his mouth open.

It was Altaïr who moved. To the bodyguard, it seemed as if his former Mentor unleashed his hidden blade with appalling slowness. The blade snicked out and the sound it made might have been as loud as a rock snapping in the heat of the sun. The bodyguard saw the blade coming towards him, towards his face, saw it approach inch by inch, second by second, as it seemed to him. But then the speed was sudden and ferocious as he felt it split his face open between the eyes. There was an explosion in his head and then, nothing.

Altaïr stood for a fraction of a second as the bodyguard fell to the ground, blood shooting from his head between the shattered eyes. Then he caught his wife as she began to collapse, and lowered her gently to the earth which would soon, he knew, receive her. A ball of ice grew in his heart. He bent over her, his face so close to hers that they seemed like lovers about to kiss. They were caught in a silence that wrapped itself around them like armour. She was trying to speak. He strained to hear her.

'Altaïr. My love. Strength.'

'Maria …' His voice was no more than an anguished whisper.

Then, appallingly, the sounds and the dust and the smells rose up violently around him again, smashing through the protecting armour, and above it all the shrieking voice of Abbas, 'He is possessed! Kill him!'

Altaïr rose, and, drawing himself to his full height, backed slowly away.

'Take the Apple!' screamed Abbas. 'Now!'

45

Altaïr fled before they could react – fled from the castle, through its gaping portal, down the escarpment and into the sparse wood which bounded the area between fortress and village on the northern side. And there, in a clearing, as if by a miracle, he was brought short by an encounter with another man, like him, but a generation younger.

‘Father!’ exclaimed the newcomer, ‘I came as soon as I’d read your message. What has happened? Am I too late?’

From the castle behind them, horns were crying out the alarm.

‘Darim! My son! Turn back!’

Darim looked past his father, over his shoulder. There, on the ridges beyond the wood, he could see bands of Assassins assembling, getting ready to hunt them down. ‘Have they all gone mad?’

‘Darim – I still have the Apple. We have to go. Abbas must not get his hands on it.’

For answer, Darim unslung his pack and drew a scabbard of throwing knives from it before placing it on the ground. ‘There are more knives in there, take them if you need them.’

The Assassins loyal to Abbas had seen them now; some were heading towards them, while others fanned out to outflank them.

‘They’ll try to ambush us,’ said Altaïr grimly. ‘Keep a good stock of knives with you. We must be prepared.’

They made their way through the wood, going ever deeper.

It was a perilous passage. Often, they had to take cover as they spotted groups of Assassins who’d got ahead of them, or who tried to take them from the side or obliquely from behind.

‘Stay close!’ Darim said. ‘We go together.’

‘We’ll try to work our way round. There are horses in the village. Once we’ve got mounts, we’ll try to make for the coast.’

Up until now, Darim had been too preoccupied with their immediate danger to think of anything else, but now he said, ‘Where is Mother?’

Altaïr shook his head, sadly. ‘She is gone, Darim. I am sorry.’

Darim took a breath. ‘What? How?!’

‘Later. Time for talk later. Now we have to get clear. We have to fight.’

‘But they are our Brothers. Our fellow Assassins. Surely we can talk – persuade them.’

‘Forget reason, Darim. They have been poisoned by lies.’

There was silence between them. Then Darim said, ‘Was it Abbas who killed my brother?’

‘He killed your brother. He killed our great comrade, Malik al-Sayf. And countless others,’ replied Altaïr, bleakly.

Darim bowed his head. ‘He is a madman. Without remorse. Without conscience.’

‘A madman with an army.’

‘He will die,’ said Darim, coldly. ‘One day, he will pay.’

They reached the outskirts of the village, and were lucky to find their way to the stables unmolested, for the village itself was teeming with Assassin warriors. Hastily they saddled up and mounted. As they rode away, they could hear Abbas’ voice, bellowing like a beast in pain, as he stood on the top of a small tower in the village square. ‘I will have the Apple, Altaïr! And I will have your HEAD, for all the dishonour you have brought upon my family! You cannot run forever! Not from us, and not from your lies!’

His voice faded into the distance as they galloped away.

Five miles down the road, they reined in. They had not – as yet – been pursued. They had gained time. But Darim, riding behind him, noticed that his father sat slumped in the saddle, exhausted and anguished. He spurred his horse closer, and looked into Altaïr’s face with concern.

Altaïr sat low, hunched, on the verge of tears.

‘Maria. My love.’ Darim heard him murmur.

‘Come, Father,’ he said. ‘We must ride on.’

Making a supreme effort, Altaïr kicked his horse into a gallop, and the two of them sped away, specks disappearing into the forbidding landscape.

46

Having deposited the new key with the others in the safety of the Assassins' Constantinople headquarters, and having delivered the copy of Socrates' *Aesop* to a grateful and marvelling Sofia, Ezio decided that it was time to make a report to Prince Suleiman on what he had discovered at the Arsenal.

He'd had some indication of where to find him, and made his way to a fashionable park near the Bayezid Mosque, where he found Suleiman and his uncle Ahmet seated in the shade of an oriental plane, the sunshine intensifying the bright green of its broad leaves. A Janissary guard stood around them at a discreet distance while they played chess. Ezio took up a position where he could watch unobserved. He wanted to speak with the Prince alone. But he was interested in chess – its strategies had taught him many skills to be applied elsewhere – and he watched the progress of the game with interest.

The two players seemed pretty equally matched. After a while, Suleiman, having pondered a move of his uncle's which put his king in danger, responded by castling.

'That's not a legal move,' said Prince Ahmet, in surprise.

'It is a European variation – *arrocco*.'

'It's interesting, but not exactly fair, when you play by different rules from your opponent.'

'You may think differently when you are Sultan,' replied Suleiman, flatly.

Ahmet looked as if he had been slapped, but said nothing. Suleiman picked up his king. 'Shall I take it back?' he asked.

In response, Ahmet rose to his feet. 'Suleiman,' he said, 'I know it has been hard on you, watching your father and me quarrel over Bayezid's throne.'

The young man shrugged. 'Grandfather has chosen you, and his word is law – *kanun*. What is there to argue about?'

Prince Ahmet looked at his nephew in grudging admiration. 'Your father and I were close once, but his cruelty and ambition have—'

'I have heard the rumours, Uncle,' Suleiman cut in, hotly.

Embarrassed, Ahmet looked away across the park for a moment, before returning his gaze to the chessboard. 'Well,' he said finally, 'I have a meeting

with the council of viziers shortly. Shall we continue another time?'

'Whenever you wish.' Suleiman was cordial.

He rose, and bowed to his uncle, who bowed in return, before leaving with his bodyguard. Ezio waited a moment, watching Suleiman as he sat down again contemplating the chessboard in his turn.

Then he moved forward.

Suleiman saw him approach, and gestured to his guards not to hinder his visitor.

'Ezio,' he said.

Ezio came straight to the point. 'Tarik has been selling guns to a local miser – Manuel Palaiologos.'

Suleiman's face darkened. He clenched his fist. 'Palaiologos. That is a sad sound in my ears.' Once again, he rose to his feet. 'The last Byzantine emperor was Constantine Palaiologos. If this heir of his is arming a militia of some kind, there will be conflict and it will escalate. All this at a time when my father and grandfather are at odds with one another.' He trailed off, and grew thoughtful. Ezio imagined that he must be brooding over one of the hardest decisions he'd ever had to make in his short life.

'Tarik knows where the rifles are headed,' he said. 'If I find him first, I can follow the weapons straight to the Byzantines.'

Suleiman looked at him. 'Tarik will be with his Janissaries, at their barracks. So, if you want to get close, you will have to become a Janissary yourself.'

Ezio smiled. 'Not a problem,' he said.

'*Güzel*,' said Suleiman. 'Excellent.' He thought some more, and it was clear that the decision he was coming to caused him distress; but once he'd made it, he was firm. 'Get the information you need – then kill him.'

Ezio raised an eyebrow. This was a side of Suleiman he had not seen before. 'Are you sure, Suleiman? You told me Tarik and your father were close friends.'

Suleiman swallowed hard, then looked defiant. 'This is true. But such naked treason against my grandfather deserves death.'

Ezio looked at him for a moment, then said, 'Understood.'

There was nothing more to discuss. Ezio took his leave. When he looked back, Suleiman was studying the chessboard again.

47

With a little help from Yusuf's Assassins, Ezio was able to isolate and corner an unsuspecting off-duty Janissary in the Bazaar, and relieve him of his uniform. But it was not without a price. The Janissary put up stiff resistance, and badly wounded two Assassins before he was overcome; but not before he himself had sustained a mortal wound. It was necessary for Ezio, with Azize's help, to wash the bloodstains thoroughly from the white garments before he put them on. Then he could pass for a Janissary guard without any question, provided he was careful to keep his beard covered with a white scarf, exposing only his moustache.

As he made his way to the barracks, he was amused and, at the same time, disconcerted at the response he evoked among the local population, both male and female, Ottomans and Byzantines alike, though the reactions were the same mixture among all the nationalities he encountered. Some were apparently admiring, even ingratiating. Others were subtly dismissive, and yet more reacted with fear and uncertainty. It was clear enough that the Janissaries were at best tolerated, at worst loathed. There was not a hint of genuine affection or regard. But from what he could gather, the greatest disdain seemed to be levelled specifically at the Janissaries belonging to Tarik's barracks. Ezio stored this experience in his memory, certain that it would prove useful at some future date, but for now he concentrated on his goal.

He was relieved that his uniform allowed him to pass unhindered and uncontested as he made his way to the barracks, the more so as he was soon to discover that the Assassins' killing of the Janissary had already been discovered. As he drew close to his destination, he passed a square where a Seljuk herald was announcing the man's death to a crowd of interested onlookers.

'Dark tidings, citizens of Kostantiniyye,' the herald was proclaiming. 'A servant of our Sultan has fallen at the hands of a criminal, and been stripped of his garments.' He looked round and raised his voice a notch. 'Be on the lookout for any suspicious activity.'

Ezio crossed the square as discreetly as possible, but eyes inevitably fell on him. He prayed that he would be able to enter the barracks unchallenged. If they

knew about the murder and that the man had been killed for his uniform, they would tighten security faster than a man could say ‘knife’.

‘Woe betide the murderer who took the life of a beloved Janissary,’ the herald continued to intone. ‘This enemy of civilization must be found, and brought to justice! If you see something, say something!’ He glared around at the crowd impressively, and shook his scroll for additional effect, before going on: ‘Citizens, beware! A killer stalks our streets, a man without conscience, targeting the servants of our Sultan. The Janissaries have dedicated their lives to the protection of the empire. Return the favour they have done us, and find this killer before he strikes again!’

The postern gate of the Janissary Garrison stood open, though flanked by a double guard. But they came to attention as Ezio arrived, and he realized that he had had the luck to waylay a senior NCO or junior officer – for the dress he wore clearly commanded respect, though to an uninitiated eye, the Janissaries’ uniforms looked virtually indistinguishable between officers and men. He entered the compound without difficulty, but no sooner had he done so than he began to pick up snippets of conversation regarding the killing.

‘*Khardeshlerim*, one of our own was found murdered and stripped of his garments not an hour ago, and his body, they say, was dumped on a dunghill like so much rubbish,’ one said to a couple of his brother soldiers, who murmured angrily at the news. ‘Keep a close watch on these streets as you move through them,’ the first to speak continued. ‘Someone is planning to strike, using our uniform as cover. We must be constantly on our guard until the culprit is caught.’

‘And disembowelled,’ added another.

Ezio decided to be as cautious a possible for as long as he was in the compound. Keeping his head down, he moved around the barracks, familiarizing himself with them and, as he did so, eavesdropping on various conversations. What he heard was most revealing and of great value.

‘Selim understands our plight. The Byzantines, the Mamluks, the Safavid – only he has the courage to face the threats those peoples represent for us,’ said one soldier.

‘You speak the truth. Selim is a warrior like Osman and Mehmet before him,’ another replied.

‘So – why has our Sultan Bayezid chosen a pussy-cat over a lion?’

‘Prince Ahmet shares the Sultan’s calm temperament. That’s why. They are too much alike, I fear.’

A third soldier joined the conversation. ‘Sultan Bayezid is a good man, and a kind ruler … But he has lost the fire that made him great.’

‘I disagree,’ said a fourth. ‘He is still a fighter. Look at the army he has raised against Selim.’

‘That’s just further evidence of his decline! To take up arms against his own son? It’s shameful.’

‘Do not bend the truth to match the contours of your passion, *efendim*,’ the fourth man rebuked him. ‘It was Selim, after all, who attacked our Sultan first.’

‘Evet, evet. But Selim did so for the glory of the empire, not for himself.’

‘Speaking of the war, is there any news from the north?’ a fifth soldier chimed in.

‘I hear that Selim’s forces have fallen back to Varna,’ said a sixth. ‘Heavy losses, I am told.’

‘Incredible, isn’t it? I pray for a swift conclusion.’

‘Yes, but in which direction?’

‘I cannot say. My heart sides with our Sultan, but my head hopes for Selim.’

‘And what of Selim’s young son, Prince Suleiman?’ a seventh Janissary put in. ‘Have you met him?’

‘‘Not personally,’ an eighth replied, ‘but I have seen him. I know he is a remarkable boy.’

‘Hardly a boy – a capable young man. With a magnificent mind.’

‘Does he take after his father?’

The seventh Janissary shrugged. ‘Perhaps. Though I suspect he is another sort of man altogether.’

Two more Janissaries came up and joined the conversation as Ezio lingered at its edge. One of them was clearly a bit of a joker. ‘Why does Prince Ahmet linger in this city?’ he asked, wryly. ‘He knows he is not wanted.’

‘He’s like a moth hovering around an open flame. He is waiting for his father to perish, so that he may take the throne.’

‘Did you hear,’ said the joker, ‘that he offered Tarik a bribe in return for our loyalty?’

‘God damn him for that. What did Tarik do?’

The other guard laughed. ‘He spent half the money on horse feed, and sent the rest to Selim!’

48

Several ornate tents were pitched within the broad compound, protected by the high walls which surrounded it. Leaving the Janissary soldiers, Ezio moved on, getting ever closer to the centre where he guessed Tarik's quarters would be found. Sure enough, as he approached, he heard the familiar tones of Tarik's voice, as he spoke to a courier. They were in the company of a third Janissary, evidently an adjutant.

'Tarik *bey*,' said the courier. 'A letter for you.'

Tarik took the letter without comment, broke the seal, and read it. He was laughing in a satisfied manner even before he had reached the end. 'Perfect,' he said, folding the paper and putting it in his tunic. 'The rifles have arrived in Cappadocia, at the garrison of Michael Palaiologos' army.'

'And our men, are they still with him?' asked the adjutant.

'*Evet*. They will contact us when the Byzantines break camp. Then we will meet them when they reach Bursa.'

The adjutant smiled. 'Then everything is falling into place, *efendim*.'

'Yes, Chagatai,' Tarik replied. 'For once.'

He waved the men away and started to walk among the tents. Keeping at a safe distance, Ezio shadowed him. But he could not remain completely unnoticed, and was glad of the little Turkish he had already picked up since his arrival in Constantinople, as guards either came to attention or soldiers of similar rank to his own greeted him. But it was not all plain sailing. Once or twice he lost his trail and noticed suspicious looks directed at him before he picked it up again; and once he faced a direct challenge. Two guards blocked his way.

'What regiment are you from, *efendim*?' the first asked him, politely enough, though with just enough edge to his voice to make Ezio wary.

Before Ezio could reply, the second cut in, 'I do not believe I know you. I do not see your imperial insignia. Are you cavalry?'

'When did you get in?' asked the first, his voice openly unfriendly now.

'Where is your captain?'

Ezio's Turkish wasn't up to this. And he saw that, in any case, their suspicions were more than aroused. Swiftly he unleashed his hookblade and tripped one up

with it, sending him crashing into the other. Then he ran, darting between tents, jumping guy-ropes, and still keeping one eye on the now distant Tarik.

There was shouting behind him:

‘Imposter!’

‘Deceiver! You will die!’

‘Stop him!’

‘It’s the outlaw who killed Nazar! Grab him!’

But the compound was very large, and Ezio took full advantage of the fact that, in their uniforms and with their almost identical moustaches, one Janissary looked very like another. Leaving confusion in his wake, he soon picked up Tarik’s trail again and located him in a quiet corner of the barracks where the senior officers’ map rooms were to be found.

Ezio watched as Tarik entered one of the map rooms, glanced around to ensure that the man was alone and that he had thrown off the last traces of pursuit, and followed Tarik in. He closed and bolted the door behind him.

Ezio had already collected all the information he believed he needed. He knew that Tarik planned to rendezvous with Manuel at Bursa, and he knew that the arms shipment had arrived in Cappadocia at Manuel’s garrison. So when Tarik immediately drew his sword and flung himself at him, he did not need to ask questions first. He stepped neatly aside to his left as Tarik thrust with his sword, then unleashed his left-hand hidden blade and plunged it into the right-hand side of the Janissary captain’s back, ripping through the kidney as he cut in hard with the blade before withdrawing it.

Tarik crashed forward onto a map table, scattering the charts which covered it, and drenching those that remained with blood. He caught his breath and, drawing on his last reserves of strength, heaved himself up on his right elbow and half turned to look at his attacker.

‘Your villainy is finished, soldier,’ said Ezio, harshly.

But Tarik seemed resigned, almost amused. Ezio was suddenly seized by doubt.

‘Ah, what bitter irony,’ said Tarik. ‘Is this the result of Suleiman’s investigation?’

‘You collude with the Sultan’s enemies,’ said Ezio, his confidence ebbing. ‘What did you expect would come of such treachery?’

Tarik gave him a regretful smile. ‘I blame myself.’ He paused, his breathing painful, as blood flowed steadily from his unstaunched side. ‘Not for treason, but hubris.’ He looked at Ezio, who had drawn closer to catch his voice, which had now sunk to little more than a whisper. ‘I was preparing an ambush. Preparing to strike the Byzantine Templars at the precise moment they felt safest.’

‘What proof do you have of this?’

‘Look. Here.’

Painfully, Tarik pulled a map from his belt with his left hand. ‘Take it,’ he said.

Ezio did so.

‘This will lead you to the Byzantines in Cappadocia,’ Tarik continued. ‘Destroy them if you can.’

Ezio’s voice had sunk to a whisper too. ‘You have done well, Tarik. Forgive me.’

‘There is no blame,’ Tarik replied, struggling now with the effort of speaking at all. But he forced himself to go on, knowing that his next words would be his last. ‘Protect my homeland. *Allah ashkina!* In God’s name, redeem the honour we have lost in this fight.’

Ezio put Tarik’s arm over his shoulder and lifted him onto the table, where he hastily tore the scarf from his neck and tied it as tightly as he could around the wound he had made.

But he was already too late.

Outside, he heard the hue and cry for him taken up once more, and close by. There was no time to repine over his mistake. Hastily he tore off the uniform until he was stripped down to the simple grey tunic and hose he wore underneath. The map room was close to the barracks wall. With the help of his hookblade, he knew the wall would be climbable.

It was time to go.

49

Ezio regained Assassin headquarters, changed, and returned to Topkapi Sarayi with a heavy heart. The guards had clearly been given orders to let him pass, and he was ushered into a private antechamber, where, after a few minutes had passed, Suleiman came to meet him. The young prince seemed surprised to see him – and agitated.

Ezio forestalled the question in his eyes. ‘Tarik was no traitor, Suleiman. He, too, was tracking the Byzantines.’

‘What?’ Suleiman’s distress was evident. ‘So, did you … ?’

Ezio nodded, gravely.

Suleiman sat down heavily. He looked ill. ‘God forgive me,’ he said, quietly. ‘I should not have been so quick to judge.’

‘Prince, he was loyal to your grandfather to the end; and through his efforts we have the means to save your city.’ Ezio briefly explained what he had found out, told him what he had learned from listening to the Janissaries and showed him the map Tarik had given him.

‘Ah, Tarik,’ whispered Suleiman. ‘He should not have been so secretive, Ezio. What a terrible way to do a good thing.’

‘The weapons have been taken to Cappadocia. We must act immediately. Can you get me there?’

Suleiman snapped out of his reverie. ‘What? Get you there? Yes, of course. I will arrange a ship to take you to Mersin – you can travel inland from there.’

They were interrupted by the arrival of Prince Ahmet. Fortunately, he called out to Suleiman in an impatient voice before he arrived, so Ezio had time to withdraw to a corner of the room where he would be less conspicuous.

Ahmet entered the room and wasted no time at all in coming to the point. ‘Suleiman, I have been set up, and made to look like a traitor! Do you remember Tarik, the Janissary?’

‘The man you quarrelled with?’

Ahmet showed signs of getting seriously angry. ‘He has been murdered. It is no secret that he and I were at odds. Now the Janissaries will be quick to accuse me of the crime.’

‘This is terrible news, Uncle.’

‘It is indeed. When word of this reaches my father, he will banish me from the city!’

Suleiman could not suppress a nervous glance over his uncle’s shoulder at Ezio. Ahmet noticed this and spun round. His manner immediately became more reserved. ‘Ah. Forgive me, nephew. I was not aware that you had a guest.’

Suleiman hesitated, then said, ‘This is … Marcello. One of my European advisers in Kefe.’

Ezio bowed low. ‘*Buona sera*.’

Ahmet made an impatient gesture. ‘Marcello, my nephew and I have a private matter to discuss,’ he said, sternly.

‘Of course. Please excuse me.’ Ezio bowed again, even lower, and backed his way to the door, exchanging a quick glance with Suleiman, who, he prayed, would get them out of this. Luckily, the young prince picked up his cue perfectly and said to Ezio in a clipped official voice, ‘You know your orders. As I’ve said, there will be a ship waiting for you when you are ready to leave.’

‘*Grazie*, *mio principe*,’ Ezio replied. He left the room then, but lingered just outside it, wishing to hear how the conversation would end. What he heard did not convince him that he was out of the woods at all.

‘We will track down the perpetrator of this crime, Uncle,’ Suleiman was saying. ‘Have patience.’

Ezio mulled that over. Could matters be that dire? He didn’t know Suleiman that well. And what was it Yusuf had warned about? Against meddling in Ottoman politics?

His mood was grim as he left the palace. There was one place he needed to be now. One place where he could relax – as he badly needed to – and collect his thoughts.

50

My guide and I regained the hidden road
Which took us back to the bright world once more.
We strode along it fast – not seeking rest –
He led, I followed, ’til at last I saw,
Through a round opening, some of the things
Of real beauty which the heavens bear;
Then we emerged, once more into fresh air,
And saw again, above us, all the stars.

Ezio had started re-reading Dante’s *Inferno* at Sofia’s suggestion several days earlier. He had read it when a student but never really taken it in, since his mind was preoccupied with other matters in those days, but now it seemed like a revelation. Having finished it, he put the book down with a sigh of pleasure. He looked across at Sofia, her glasses perched on her nose as she sat, head down, glancing from the original map to her reference books to a notebook she was writing in. He gazed at her as she worked, but did not interrupt, so deeply engaged did she seem in the task at hand. Instead, he reached for the book again. Perhaps he should make a start on the *Purgatorio*.

Just then, Sofia lifted her eyes from her work. She smiled at him.

‘Enjoying the poem?’

He smiled back, and placed the book on the table by his chair, and rose. ‘Who were these men he condemned to hell?’

‘Political opponents, men who wronged him. Dante Alghieri’s pen cuts deeply, no?’

‘*Sì*,’ Ezio replied, thoughtfully. ‘It is a subtle way to seek revenge.’

He didn’t want to return to reality, but the urgency of the journey he soon had to make pressed upon him. Still, there was nothing he could do until he had word from Suleiman. Provided that he could trust the prince. But his thoughts had calmed. How could it profit Suleiman to betray him? He resumed his seat, picked up *The Divine Comedy* again, and turned to the place where he had left off.

She interrupted him. ‘Ezio,’ she began, hesitantly, ‘I plan to make a trip to Adrianopolis in a few weeks, to visit a new printing press there.’

Ezio noticed the shy tone of her voice and wondered if she had picked up the softness that had crept into his whenever he spoke to her. Had she realized how great his … affection for her had become? Overcompensating, he was deliberately nonchalant when he replied, ‘That should be fun.’

She was still diffident. ‘It is a five or six day ride from here, and I will need an escort.’

‘*Prego?*’

She was instantly embarrassed. ‘I’m sorry. You are a busy man.’

It was his turn to be embarrassed. ‘Sofia, I would love to accompany you, but my time is running short.’

‘That is true for all of us.’

He didn’t know how to respond to that, taking its meaning several ways; and remained silent. He was thinking of the twenty-year age-gap between them.

Sofia looked down at the map for a moment, then back up. ‘Well, I could try to finish this last cipher now, but I need to run an errand before sundown. Can you wait a day?’

‘What do you need?’

She looked away and back again. ‘It’s silly, but … a bouquet of fresh flowers. White tulips, specifically.’

He got up. ‘I’ll get you the flowers. *Nessun problema*.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘It will be a nice change of pace.’

She smiled warmly. ‘*Bene!* Look – meet me in the park just to the east of Hagia Sofia. We will trade: flowers for … information!’

51

The Flower Market was a blaze of colour and pleasant scents, and there wasn't a Janissary in sight. Ezio made his way through it anxiously, as nowhere in all this cornucopia had he yet been able to find any of the flowers he sought.

'You look like a man with money to spend,' said a flower-seller, as Ezio approached his stall. 'What do you need, my friend?'

'I'm looking for tulips. White ones, if you have them.'

The flower-seller looked doubtful. 'Ah. Tulips. Forgive me, but I am fresh out. Something else, perhaps?'

Ezio shook his head. 'It's not up to me, unfortunately.'

The flower-seller thought about the problem for a moment, then leant forward. He spoke confidentially, 'OK, just for you, here is my secret. Many of the white tulips I sell, I pick myself near the hippodrome. Not a word of a lie. You go and see for yourself.'

Ezio smiled, took out his wallet, and tipped the flower-seller generously. '*Grazie*.'

Busily, a man in haste, he made his way through the sun-warmed streets to the hippodrome, and, sure enough, in the grass along one side of the racetrack, he found white tulips growing in abundance. Happily, he bent down, and, unleashing his hidden blade, cut as many as he hoped Sofia would want.

52

The Imperial Park to the east of Hagia Sofia was laid out as formal gardens, interspersed with verdant lawns dotted with white marble benches and arbours ideal for private meetings. In one of them he soon found Sofia.

She had laid out a little picnic, and Ezio could see at a glance that it wasn't local food and drink. She'd managed somehow to organize a lunch which brought together some of the specialities of both their home towns, so there was *moleche* and *rixoto de gò* from Venice, and *panzanella* and *salame toscano* from Florence. She'd also provided figs from Tuscolo and olives from Piceno, and there was a dish of macaroni and turbot. The wine she'd brought was a Frescobaldi. A wicker hamper stood by the neat white cloth she'd laid.

'What is this?' he said, marvelling.

'A gift. Sit.'

Ezio bowed, handing her the flowers, and did as he was bidden.

'These are beautiful – thank you,' she said, accepting the huge bouquet of tulips he had cut for her.

'So is this,' he replied. 'And don't think I don't appreciate the trouble you've been to.'

'I wanted to thank you for letting me play a small role in your adventure.'

'I would scarcely have called it small, but a "small" role is quite enough for this adventure, believe me.'

She laughed quietly. 'You are a mystery, Ezio Auditore.'

He looked worried. 'I'm sorry – I do not mean to be.'

She laughed again. 'It's fine!' She paused, then added, 'It's attractive.'

Ezio didn't know how to respond to that, so he concentrated on the food. 'This looks delicious.'

'Why, thank you.'

Ezio smiled. He didn't want to break the mood, but a shadow had fallen over his thoughts. He mustn't celebrate – or hope for anything – prematurely. He looked at her more seriously and she immediately caught his frame of mind.

'Any luck with the final code?' he asked, as casually as he could.

‘Ah, the code,’ she replied, still a little playful, and Ezio was relieved. ‘Yes, I solved it a few hours ago. But you’ll have to be patient. You will get it soon enough.’

And she looked at him then in a way that broke down any defences Ezio had left.

53

The last book was located in a place more difficult to get to. Niccolò Polo had managed to conceal it high on the front façade of the mosque of Hagia Sofia itself, above the great curved arch which stood before the principal dome of the former basilica.

Ezio chose to complete his mission in the small hours before dawn, as then there would be the smallest number of people about. He reached the building unchallenged, and carefully made his way to the exonarthex, looking up at the cliff of stone which he had now to climb. There were few crevices for his hookblade to get a grip, but after several unsuccessful attempts, he managed to climb to the spot Sofia had pinpointed. There, he found a weathered wooden panel overhung with cobwebs.

He managed to belay himself to some nearby pipework which, after testing, he found solid enough to take his weight, and he used the hookblade again to prise the panel open. The wooden board fell to the ground beneath with what to Ezio's ears was a deafening, echoing clatter, and he hung there in the grey light of false dawn silently praying that no one would have been alerted by the noise. But after he had waited for three whole minutes and there was no reaction, he reached into the cavity the board had concealed and from it drew the book he sought.

Once back on the ground he sped away and found a quiet spot in the very park where he had dined with Sofia only the day before, and there examined his find. The book was a copy of Luitpold of Cremona's *Mission to Constantinople*. He allowed himself to imagine for a moment Sofia's pleasure at the sight of such a rarity before turning to the front.

The blank pages glowed as brightly as the thin streaks of dawn light he could see away to the east across the Bosphorus. A map of the city appeared, which, as he watched hopefully, resolved itself into focus. On it appeared another light, brighter than the rest, clearly marking the Forum of the Ox.

Following the trail indicated in the book, Ezio made his way to the Forum, away in the west of the city, past the Second and Third Hills, and about midway between the Aqueduct of Valens to the north and the Harbour of Theodosius to the south. It was quite a walk, but when he arrived it was still too early for

anyone to be about. Ezio scanned the huge deserted square for some kind of clue, but the marked spot in the book gleamed sharply, and he remembered the system of subterranean cisterns beneath the city. He concentrated his search and located, after a little time, a manhole from which stone steps descended into the bowels of the earth.

Ezio closed the book and stowed it safely in his satchel. He replaced his hookblade with his pistol, checked his hidden blade, and warily made his way downwards.

He soon found himself in a vaulted cavern on a stone embankment by which an underground river ran. Lit torches stood in sconces on the walls and, as he crept quietly through a narrow, damp corridor, he heard, above the sound of rushing water, echoing voices raised above the din the river made. Following the sound of them, he came upon two Byzantine Templars.

'What have you found?' one said. 'Another key?'

'A door of some kind,' his comrade answered. 'Bricked up with hard stone.'

Rounding a corner, Ezio saw a number of soldiers a short distance away standing on an old pier which jutted into the river. One of them was rolling a barrel off one of two waiting rafts.

'That sounds promising,' the first of the nearer Templars said. 'The first key was found behind a similar door.'

'Is that so? And how did they open that door?'

'They didn't. The earthquake did.'

On a signal from the men closer to Ezio, the other soldiers came up with the barrel, which they proceeded to lodge in place against the door. Ezio could now see that the opening was sealed with close-fitting blocks of some hard black stone, cut by a master mason.

'The earthquake! That was helpful,' said the second Templar. 'And all we have is a few barrels of gunpowder.'

'This one should be big enough for the job,' replied the first.

Ezio's eyes narrowed. He quietly released his gun and pulled back the hammer.

'If it isn't, we'll just get more,' the first Templar continued.

Ezio raised his arm and took aim, but the barrel of the gun caught the light of a torch as he did so and glinted, the unusual flash of light catching the eye of one of the soldiers.

'What?' he snapped.

He saw the gun and leapt in front of the barrel at the same moment that Ezio fired. The ball struck him and he fell dead instantly.

Ezio swore to himself.

But the soldiers were onto him now.

‘It’s the Assassin! Let’s get out of here!’

Ezio tried to reload, but the soldiers were already making their way back towards the rafts. He followed, desperate to stop them before they could raise the alarm, but as he reached the pier they were already pushing off. By the time Ezio had leapt onto the second raft and was struggling to loose its moorings, the soldiers were in midstream floating away.

He had cast off and was in pursuit when the thought struck him – were they scared of him or were they leading him on? Well, it was too late now. He’d have to play this to the end.

As his raft was lighter, the current began to carry him closer. The soldiers seemed to be in a panic, but that didn’t stop them from priming bombs and loading muskets.

‘We have gunpowder aboard, we should use it!’ one cried.

‘We’ll blast him out of the water with grenades,’ said another, throwing a bomb, which exploded as it hit the water barely a foot ahead of Ezio’s prow.

‘Give me some room,’ yelled another soldier, trying to steady himself, to take aim with his musket.

‘Shoot him!’

‘What do you think I’m trying to do?’

‘Just kill the bastard!’

They careered on downstream. Ezio had managed by now to grasp the tiller of his raft and brought it under control, all the while having to duck and dive to avoid the musket balls that cannoned towards him, though the pitch and roll of their raft made it all but impossible for the soldiers to take serious aim. Then one of the barrels aboard worked free of its ropes and rolled around the deck, knocking two soldiers into the torrent – one of them, their tiller man. The raft bucked wildly, throwing another man into the black water, and then smashed into the side of the embankment. The survivors scrambled to the bank. Ezio looked up to the high vault which ran perhaps twenty feet above the river. In the gloom, he could see that a taut rope had been slung the length of the roof, and no doubt barges or rafts were often hooked to it to guide them down the river. You’d only need one person aboard with a pole to unhook and rehook round each of the eyelets to which the rope was affixed at regular intervals. Ezio could see that the rope, following the river’s downhill course, sloped gradually downwards too. Just enough for what he had planned.

Bracing himself, Ezio steered his own raft for the embankment and, as it smashed into the one he’d been pursuing, he leapt from it onto the stone pathway at the river’s side.

By that time, the surviving soldiers were already some way ahead of him, running for their lives – or to summon reinforcements. Ezio had no time to waste.

Working fast, he swapped his gun for his hookblade, scrambled up the side wall of the cavern, and threw himself towards the rope over the river. He had just enough momentum to catch it with his hookblade, and soon he was shooting downstream over the water, far faster than the soldiers could run, though he had to unhook and rehook with split-second timing at each eyelet in the roof to avoid falling into the roaring torrent beneath.

As he caught up with the soldiers he reversed his first manoeuvre and unhooked at the crucial moment, throwing his body sideways so that he landed on the embankment just ahead of the Templars. They stopped dead, panting, facing him.

'He is a madman,' said the first Templar.

'This is no man – this is a demon,' a second cried.

'Let's see if demons bleed,' bellowed a braver comrade, coming at Ezio, his sword whirling in his hand.

Ezio performed a hook and roll over his back and pitched him, while he was still off-balance, into the river. Three soldiers remained. The fight had all but gone out of them but Ezio knew he could not afford to be merciful. The ensuing clash was short and bloody, and left Ezio nursing a gashed left arm, and three corpses lying before him.

Gulping air, he made his way back to the sealed door. They had come a long way downriver and it took him a good ten minutes to regain the jetty where the rafts had originally been moored. But at least he knew that he need be in no immediate fear of pursuit; and the barrel of gunpowder was still lodged where the Templar soldiers had placed it.

Replacing his hookblade with his pistol once more, Ezio loaded it, chose a position upstream from where he could take cover behind a projecting buttress, took careful aim, and fired.

There was the crack of the pistol and the hiss of the ball as it shot towards the barrel, even the thud as it struck home, but then there seemed, for what seemed an eternity, to be silence.

Nothing happened.

But then …

The explosion in those confines was like a thunderclap, and Ezio was deafened. He thought, as tiny stones rained down all around him, that he might have brought the roof in, that he might have irreparably damaged whatever was

behind the door. But when the dust settled, he could see that for all the force of the explosion, the sealed entrance was still only partially breached.

Enough, however, for him to reach within it, and see the familiar plinth, on which, to his intense relief, the circular obsidian key, partner to the others he had collected, rested undamaged. But he had no time to relax. Even as he reached for it, he noticed the glow emanating from it which he had experienced with the others. As it grew in intensity, he tried, this time, to resist its power. He felt undermined, unsettled by the strange visions which succeeded the blinding light he had come to expect.

But it was no use, and he felt himself once more surrendering to a power far greater than his own.

54

To Ezio, it appeared that twenty long years had passed. The landscape was one he knew, and there, rising from it like a giant claw, stood the by-now familiar castle of Masyaf. Not far from its gate, a group of three Assassins sat near a blazing camp-fire …

The Assassins' faces were those of people whose better dreams have gone dark. When they spoke, their voices were quiet, weary.

'They say he screams in his sleep, calling out for his father, Ahmad Sofian,' said one of them.

One of the men scoffed bitterly. 'So, Cemal, he calls out for his daddy, does he? What a miserable man Abbas is.'

They had their faces to the fire and did not at first notice the old, cowled man in white robes who was approaching through the darkness.

'It is not our place to judge, Teragani,' said the second man, coldly.

'It certainly is, Tazim,' Cemal cut in. 'If our Mentor has gone mad, I want to know about it.'

The old man was close now, and they became aware of him.

'Hush, Cemal,' said Tazim. Turning to greet the newcomer, he said, '*Masa'il kher*.'

The old man's voice was as dry as a dead leaf. 'Water,' he said.

Teragani stood, and passed him a small gourd which he had dipped in a water jar next to him.

'Sit. Drink,' said Cemal.

'Many thanks,' said the old man.

The others watched him as he drank, quietly.

'What brings you here, old man?' asked Tazim, after their guest had drunk his fill.

The stranger thought for a moment before he spoke. Then he said, 'Pity Abbas, but do not mock him. He has lived as an orphan most of his life, and been shamed by his family's legacy.'

Tazim looked shocked at this statement, but Teragani smiled quietly. He stole a glance at the old man's hand and saw that his left-hand ring finger was missing. So, unless it was an extraordinary coincidence, the man was an Assassin. Teragani looked covertly at the lined, gaunt face. There was something familiar about it …

'Abbas is desperate for power because he is power*less*,' the old man continued.

'But he is our Mentor!' Tazim cried. 'And, unlike Al Mualim or Altaïr ibn-La'Ahad, he never betrayed us!'

'Nonsense,' Teragani said. 'Altaïr was no traitor.' He looked at the old man keenly. 'Altaïr was driven out – unjustly.'

'You don't know what you speak of!' stormed Tazim, and strode off into the darkness.

The old man looked at Teragani and Cemal from beneath his cowl, but said nothing. Teragani looked at the face again. Most of it was shaded by the hood, but the eyes could not be hidden. And Teragani had noticed that the man's right cuff just failed to conceal the harness of a hidden blade.

The Assassin spoke tentatively. 'Is it … Is it – you?' He paused. 'I heard rumours, but I did not believe them.'

The old man gave the ghost of a smile. 'I wonder if I might speak with Abbas myself. It has been a long time.'

Cemal and Teragani looked at each other. Cemal drew in a long breath. He took the old man's gourd from him and refilled it, handing it back to him with reverence. He spoke awkwardly. 'That would be impossible. Abbas employs rogue *Fedayeen* to keep us from the inner sanctum of the castle these days.'

'Less than half the fighters here are true Assassins now,' added Teragani. He paused, then said, 'Altaïr.'

The old man smiled and nodded almost imperceptibly. 'But I can see that the true Assassins remain just that – *true*,' he said.

'You have been away a long time, Mentor. Where did you go?'

'I travelled. Studied. Studied deeply. Rested. Recovered from my losses, learned to live with them. In short, I did what anyone in my position would have done.' He paused, and his tone altered slightly as he went on, 'I also visited our brothers at Alamut.'

'Alamut? How do they fare?'

Altaïr shook his head. 'It is over for them now. The Mongols under Khan Hulagu overran them and took the fortress. They destroyed the library. The Mongols range ever westward like a plague of locusts. Our only hope is to reaffirm our presence here and in the west. We must be strong here. But perhaps

our bases from now on should be among the people, not in fortresses like Masyaf.'

'Is it really you?' asked Cemal.

'Hush!' Teragani interrupted. 'We do not want to get him killed.'

Cemal suddenly tensed. 'Tazim!' he said, suddenly worried.

Teragani grinned. 'Tazim is more bark than bite. He likes an argument for its own sake more than anything else in the world. And he has been as dispirited as us, which hasn't helped his mood. Besides, he left before this little play reached its denouement!' He turned to Altaïr, all trace of his former despondency gone. 'We clearly have work to do.'

'So,' said the old man, 'where do I begin?'

Cemal looked again at Teragani. They both rose, and pulled their hoods up over their heads. 'With us, Altaïr,' he said.

Altaïr smiled, and rose in his turn. He got up like an old man, but once he was on his feet, he stood firm.

55

They walked towards the castle together.

‘You say these men are cruel,’ said Altaïr. ‘Has any man raised his blade against an innocent?’

‘Alas, yes,’ Cemal replied. ‘Brutality seems to be their sole source of pleasure.’

‘Then they must die, for they have compromised the Order,’ said Altaïr. ‘But those who still live by the Creed must be spared.’

‘You can put your trust in us,’ said Cemal.

‘I am sure of it. Now – leave me. I wish to reconnoitre alone, and it is not as if I am unfamiliar with this place.’

‘We will remain within call.’

Altaïr nodded, and turned to face the castle gates, as his two companions fell back. He approached the entrance, keeping to the shadows, and passed the sentries without difficulty, thinking with regret that no true Assassin sentries would have let him slip by so easily. He hugged the walls of the outer bailey, skirting them until he was able to cross to a torch-lit guard post not far from the gates of the inner, where he saw two captains engaged in conversation. Altaïr paused to listen to them. After a few words had been exchanged, he knew them to be men loyal to Abbas. Abbas! *Why*, thought Altaïr, *did I shown the man mercy*? What suffering might have been avoided if he had not! But then, perhaps, after all, mercy had been Abbas’ due, whatever the cost of it.

‘You’ve heard the stories going around the village?’ said the first officer.

‘About Abbas and his nightmares?’

‘No, no.’ The first man dropped his voice, ‘About Altaïr.’

‘Altaïr? What?’

‘People are saying that an old Assassin saved the life of a merchant down in the valley. They say he fought with a hidden blade.’

The second officer shook his head, dismissively. ‘Rumours. I don’t believe a word of it.’

‘True or not, say nothing to Abbas. He is sick with paranoia.’

‘If Altaïr is anywhere in these parts, we should act first – seek him out and kill him like the vile old cur he is. He will only spread discontent like he did before, making each man responsible for his decisions. Undermining the authority that has made Abbas great.’

‘An iron fist. That is all anyone understands.’

‘You are right. No order without control.’

Altaïr had taken his time to assess the situation. He knew that Cemal and Teragani were somewhere in the shadows behind him. These two officers seemed to be all that stood between him and the inner bailey, and their speech had proved them to be sworn to Abbas’ doctrines – doctrines which had far more to do with Templar thinking than that of true Assassins.

He coughed, very gently, and moved into the pool of light.

The two officers turned on him.

‘Who the hell are you?’

‘Clear out, old man, if you know what’s good for you.’

The first to speak laughed harshly. ‘Why don’t we just cut him down where he stands? The pigs will be glad of the extra meal.’

Altaïr did not speak. Instead, he extended his left hand, palm towards them, so that they could see that his ring finger was missing.

They took a step back, simultaneously drawing their scimitars. ‘The usurper returns!’ barked the second captain.

‘Who’d have thought it? After so long.’

‘What brings you back?’

‘A dog returning to its vomit.’

‘You talk too much,’ said Altaïr. With the economical movements an old man must learn, but with none of an old man’s slowness, he unleashed his hidden blade as he stepped forward and lunged – once, twice – with deadly accuracy.

He moved on towards the gates of the inner bailey, still wary, and his caution paid off. He saw a third captain standing by them and was just in time to duck out of sight before the man could notice him. As he watched, he heard a faint yell behind him and from the darkness a young Assassin came sprinting towards the officer. He whispered something to him and the captain’s eyes went wide in surprise and anger. Clearly, the bodies of the corrupt Assassins Altaïr had just dispatched had already been discovered. Now his own presence would doubtless no longer be a secret here. Swiftly, Altaïr exchanged his hidden blade for the spring-loaded pistol which he had developed from designs during his studies in the east.

‘Send him a message, quickly!’ the captain was ordering his young henchman. He raised his voice. ‘Assassins of the Brotherhood of Abbas! To me!’

Altaïr stood, quietly weighing his options, when from close to his elbow a friendly voice said, ‘Mentor!’

He turned to see Cemal and Teragani. With them were half a dozen fellow-Assassins.

‘We could not prevent the discovery of those captains you killed – two of the cruellest in the band, who would never have risen to rank under anyone save Abbas,’ Cemal explained quickly, ‘but we have brought reinforcements. And this is only a start.’

‘Welcome.’ Altaïr smiled.

Cemal smiled back. Behind him, the little detachment of true Assassins raised their hoods, almost in unison.

‘We’d better shut him up,’ said Teragani, nodding towards the blustering third captain.

‘Allow me,’ said Altaïr. ‘I need the exercise.’

He stepped forward to confront the rogue Assassin officer. By now a number of the man’s own renegade soldiers had rushed to his aid.

‘There he is!’ yelled the captain. ‘Kill him! Kill all the traitors!’

‘Think before you act,’ said Altaïr. ‘Every action has its consequences.’

‘You pathetic miser! Stand down or die!’

‘You could have been spared, friend,’ said Altaïr, as his supporters stepped out of the shadows.

‘I am not your friend, old man,’ retorted the captain, and rushed at Altaïr, slicing at him with his sword before the old Mentor seemed fully ready. But he was ready. The conflict was short and bloody. At the end of it, the captain and most of his men lay dead under the gates.

‘Follow me to the castle keep,’ cried Altaïr, ‘and spill no more blood, if you can help it. Remember the true Code.’

At the portal to the inner bailey, another captain stood, in his black and dark grey robes, the Assassin emblem glinting on his belt in the torchlight. He was an older man, of perhaps some fifty summers.

‘Altaïr ibn-La’Ahad,’ he said in a firm voice that knew no fear. ‘Two decades have passed since we last saw you within these walls. Two decades which, I see, have been kinder to your face than they have been to our decrepit Order.’ He paused. ‘Abbas used to tell us stories … About Altaïr the arrogant. Altaïr the deceiver. Altaïr the betrayer. But I never believed these tales. And now I see here, standing before me, Altaïr the Master. And I am humbled.’

He stepped forward and extended his arm in friendship. Altaïr took it in a firm grasp, hand gripping wrist, in a Roman handshake. A number of Assassin guards, clearly his men, ranged themselves behind him.

‘We could use your wisdom, great Master. Now, more than ever.’ He stood back and addressed his troops: ‘Our Mentor is returned!’

The soldiers sheathed their drawn weapons and raised their hoods. Joining forces with Altaïr’s existing group of loyal Assassins, they made their way towards the dark-towered Keep of Masyaf.

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But hardly were they within the confines of the inner bailey than Abbas himself appeared behind a detachment of rogue Assassins. Abbas, recognizable still, but an old man too, with sunken eyes and hollow cheeks – a haunted, frightened, driven man.

‘Kill him!’ bellowed Abbas. ‘Kill him now!’

His men hesitated.

‘What are you waiting for?’ Abbas screamed, his voice cracking with strain.

But they were frozen with indecision, looking at their fellows standing against them and at each other.

‘You fools! He has bewitched you!’

Still nothing. Abbas looked at them, spat, and disappeared within the Keep.

There was still a stand-off, as Assassin confronted Assassin. In the tense silence, Altaïr raised his left hand – the one maimed at his initiation into the Brotherhood.

‘There is no witchcraft here,’ he said simply. ‘Nor sorcery. Do as your conscience bids. But death has stalked here too long. And we have too many *real* enemies – we can’t afford to turn against each *other*.’

One of Abbas’ reluctant defenders doffed his cowl and stepped forward, kneeling before Altaïr. ‘Mentor,’ she said.

Another quickly joined him. ‘Welcome home,’ he added.

Then a third. ‘I fight for you. For the Order.’

The others quickly followed the example of the first three men, greeting Altaïr as a long-lost brother, embracing their former opponents in fellowship again. Only a handful still spat insults, and retreated after Abbas into the Keep.

Altaïr, at the head of his troop, led the way into the Keep itself. They stopped in the great hall, looking up to where Abbas stood at the head of the central staircase. He was flanked by rogue Assassins loyal to him, and spearmen and archers ranged the gallery.

Altaïr regarded them calmly. Under his gaze, the rogue Assassins wavered. But they did not break.

‘Tell your men to stand down, Abbas,’ he commanded.

‘Never! I am defending Masyaf! Would you not do the same?’

‘Abbas, you corrupted everything we stand for, and lost everything we gained. All of it sacrificed on the altar of your own spite.’

‘And you,’ Abbas spat back, ‘you have wasted your life staring into that accursed Apple, dreaming only of your own glory.’

Altaïr took a step forward. As he did so, two of Abbas’ spearmen stepped forward, brandishing their arms.

‘Abbas – it is true that I have learned many things from the Apple. About life and death, and about the past and the future.’ He paused. ‘I regret this, my old comrade, but I see that I have no choice but to demonstrate to you one of the things I have learned. Nothing else will stop you, I see. And you will never change now and see the light that is still available to you.’

‘Kill the traitors!’ Abbas shouted in reply. ‘Kill every one of them and throw their bodies onto the dunghill!’

Abbas’s men bristled, but still held off attacking. Altaïr knew that there was no turning back now. He raised his gun arm, unleashed the pistol from its shaft, and, as it sprang into his grip, aimed and fired at the man who, seven decades earlier had, for a short time, been his best friend. Abbas staggered under the blow of the ball as it struck him, a look of disbelief and surprise on his wizened features. He gasped, swayed, reaching out wildly for support, but no one came to his aid. And then he fell, crashing over and over down the long stone stairs, to come to rest at Altaïr’s feet. His legs had broken in the fall and stuck out at crazy angles from his body.

But he was not dead. Not yet. He managed to raise himself painfully, high enough to hold his head up, and looked Altaïr in the eye.

‘I can never forgive you, Altaïr,’ he managed to croak. ‘For the lies you told about my family, my father. For the humiliation I suffered.’

Altaïr looked down at him but there was only regret in his eyes. ‘They were not lies, Abbas. I was ten years old when your father came to my room to see me. He was in tears, begging to be forgiven for betraying *my* family.’ Altaïr paused. ‘Then he cut his own throat.’

Abbas held his enemy’s eye but did not speak. The pain in his face was that of a man confronting a truth he could not bear.

‘I watched his life ebb away at my feet,’ Altaïr went on. ‘I shall never forget that image.’

Abbas moaned in agony. ‘No!’

‘But he was not a coward, Abbas. He reclaimed his honour.’

Abbas knew he had not much longer to live. The light in his eyes was already fading as he said, ‘I hope there is another life after this. At least then I shall see

him, and know the truth of his final days …’

He coughed, the movement racking his body, and when his breath came again as he strove to speak, the rattle was already in it. But when he found his voice, it was firm and unrepentant.

‘And when it is your time, O Altaïr, then, then we will find you. And then there will be no doubts.’

Abbas collapsed and his body slumped to the stone floor.

Altaïr stood over him in the silence that surrounded them, his head bowed. There was no movement but that of the shadows stirred by the flickering torchlight.

57

When Ezio came to himself, he feared that the dawn would have broken, but he saw only the palest shades of red in the sky to the east, and the sun had not yet even breached the low brown hills of Asia which lay in the distance beyond the city.

Weary, worn out by his experience, he made his way first to the Assassins' headquarters, to give the key into the safekeeping of Azize. Then, his legs aching under him, he went almost instinctively to Sofia's shop. It was early still, but he'd ring the bell until she awoke in her apartment above it. He hoped she'd be pleased to see him – or at least, the new addition to her library – he was frankly too tired to care whether she'd be excited or not. He just wanted to lie down and sleep. Later on he had a rendezvous with Yusuf at the Spice Market, and he had to be fresh for that.

He was also impatient for news of his ship – the one which would take him to Mersin, from where he'd journey north into Cappadocia. And that journey would require all the strength he could summon up.

The Spice Market was already crowded by the time Ezio reached it, though he had contented himself with a mere two hours' rest. He shouldered his way through the people milling around the stalls until, a few yards ahead of him, he saw a thief in the act of grabbing a large, stiff bag of spices, giving the elderly trader who tried to stop him a vicious shove as he made his getaway.

By luck, the thief ran in Ezio's direction, snaking his way through the mob with extraordinary agility. As he came abreast of Ezio, the Assassin tripped him up neatly with his hookblade. The thief dropped the sack as he fell and glared up at Ezio, but one look from his attacker made him drop any thought of retaliation and, picking himself up, he vanished into the crowd as fast as a rat into its hole.

'Thank you, *efendim*,' said the grateful trader as Ezio handed his bag back to him. 'Saffron. You have spared me a great loss. Perhaps you will accept … ?'

But Ezio had spotted Yusuf in the crowd and, after shaking his head and smiling briefly at the trader, he made his way over to his lieutenant.

'What news?' he said as he reached him.

‘We have had word – very discreetly – that your ship is ready to sail,’ said Yusuf. ‘I did not know you planned to leave us.’

‘Is nothing I do a secret?’ Ezio answered, laughing lightly, but glad to hear that Suleiman had kept his word.

‘The young prince’s spies are almost as good as our own,’ replied Yusuf. ‘I expect he sent word to me because he knew you were … otherwise engaged.’

Ezio thought back to the two hours he had spent with Sofia and was glad that he had managed to have them, since now he did not know when he would see her again – or *if* he would see her again. And still he had not dared tell her of the feelings which were growing within him and which would no longer be denied. Could it really be that his long wait for love was finally coming to an end? If it were, it would have certainly been worth it.

But he had other, more immediate things on his mind now.

‘We had hoped to have had your broken hidden blade repaired by now,’ Yusuf went on. ‘But the only armourer skilled enough to do the work is in Salonica and will not return until next month.’

‘Keep the blade and when it is repaired add it to your own armoury,’ said Ezio, ‘in exchange for my hookblade. It is more than a fair trade.’

‘I am glad you appreciate its qualities. I just watched you deal with that thief, and I think you have more than mastered its use.’

‘I could not have done without it.’

The two men grinned at each other, then Ezio’s expression became serious. ‘I hope, though, that my intended voyage is not common knowledge.’

Yusuf gave a little laugh. ‘Not to worry, brother. The captain of your ship is a friend and already known to you.’

‘Who, then?’

‘Piri Reis. You are honoured.’ Yusuf paused, troubled now. ‘But neither of you is going anywhere just yet.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘The Janissaries have raised the chain across the mouth of the Golden Horn, and ordered a full blockade until you are caught.’ Yusuf paused. ‘Until that chain is down, nothing sails in or out.’

Ezio felt rather proud. ‘You mean they raised the chain for me?’

Yusuf was amused. ‘We will celebrate later. Here – I have something for you.’

Drawing Ezio into a discreet alcove, he produced a bomb, and carefully handed it over. ‘Treat this with respect. It has fifty times the kick of our usual bombs.’

‘Thank you. And you had better gather your people. This will attract some attention.’

‘Here are two smoke bombs. You may find them useful, too.’

‘*Bene*. I know what to do.’

‘I’m sure. The suspense is palpable,’ joked Yusuf.

‘I’ll take the tower on the south bank. It’s closer.’

‘I’ll join you at the quay and point your ship out to you. *Sinav icin iyi sanslar!*’

Ezio grinned. ‘Good luck to you, too, my friend.’

Yusuf was about to go, when Ezio stopped him.

‘Yusuf, wait. *Un favore*.’

‘Yes?’

‘‘There is a woman running a bookshop at the old Polo trading post … Sofia. Look out for her. She is a remarkable lady.’

Yusuf gave him a keen look, then said seriously, ‘You have my word.’

‘Thank you. And now – we have work to do.’

‘The sooner the better!’

Placing the bomb carefully in his side-pouch, and hooking the smoke bombs onto his belt, Ezio swapped his left-hand hidden blade for his pistol, and immediately hastened north towards the tower opposite Galata on the south side of the Horn. The great chain was suspended between the two banks.

Here Yusuf joined him. ‘My archers are in place. They’ll cover your escape,’ he said. ‘Now – look – there, in the outer harbour. The red dhow with the white furled sail and the silver pennant? That is Piri’s ship. It is crewed and ready. He is waiting for you.’

The tower was surrounded by ramparts. Small watchtowers stood at the eastern and western extremities of these. From their tops, taut haulage-ropes led down to jetties. At the outer point of one of them Ezio noticed a weapon emplacement. A massive squitatoria, a flamethrower for Greek Fire, stood primed, heated and ready for action, manned by a crew of three. Around the tower itself stood a number of Ottoman guards. Ezio would have to put all of them out of commission before he’d be able to place the bomb, and he thanked Yusuf silently for the smoke grenades. There was nowhere to take cover, so he moved in boldly and quickly for a frontal attack.

As soon as the guards saw him, the hue and cry was raised, and they massed to fall on him. He stood his ground, letting them approach, but drawing his scarf closely over his nose and mouth and pulling his hood low over his eyes.

As soon as they were within range, he pulled the pins on both grenades and threw them to right and left amongst the guards. They detonated instantly, and dense grey smoke billowed out, encompassing the guards in a moment. Diving

into the confusion, Ezio, eyes narrowed against the acrid fumes, drew his scimitar and with it cut down the defenceless soldiers as they staggered about, disoriented by the unexpected fog which suddenly surrounded them. He had to act quickly, for the light wind blowing in from the Bosphorus would soon disperse the smoke, but he succeeded, and placed the bomb on a ledge at the base of the tower, just beneath the first huge links of the chain, which rose above his head to the winch-room inside. Then he took a good few steps back towards the water's edge, and from there unleashed his pistol and fired at the bomb, igniting it and instantly diving for cover behind a large iron bollard on the quay.

The explosion was immense. Grime and stones were thrown everywhere as the colossal chains snapped free of the tower and whiplashed over Ezio's head into the water, snapping ships' masts as they flew past. As Ezio watched, the tower itself shifted on its base. It shifted again, seeming to settle but then imploded, collapsing in a mass of broken brick and dust.

Moments later a platoon of Janissaries rushed into the square, heading straight for Ezio, who by now had broken cover. He dodged past them and used his hookblade to scale the eastern watchtower, knocking out the guard at its top when he reached it, and hooking himself to the rope which led from it down to the jetty on which the squitatoria was placed. As he prepared to effect a zipline, he saw the Janissaries fitting arrows to their bows. Before they had time to take aim and fire, they themselves were cut down by a hail of arrows which rained down on them from Assassin bows. More Assassins rushed into the area around the ruined tower, skipping lightly over the debris to engage with the Janissaries who'd survived the first onslaught.

Among them was Yusuf. Looking up, he yelled to Ezio, 'Remember – the red dhow! And the ships between you and it are armed – they'll stop you sailing if they can.'

'I'll take care of them,' Ezio called back, grimly.

'And we'll clear the docks!'

Ezio let the rope take his weight on the hookblade, and kicked off from the watchtower, zooming down to the flamethrower emplacement and leaping off just before he reached it. He threw himself at the nearest of the crew, who were preparing to turn their weapon on the Assassins fighting by the tower. The first he knocked into the water, where the man was crushed between the shifting hulls of two moored barges. The others he swiftly dispatched with his hookblade.

He scanned the flamethrower, quickly acquainting himself with its mechanism. It was on a swivel base, operated by a crank at the left-hand side. The cannon itself was made of brass, its mouth in the shape of a lion's head, from which the bronze tube within projected slightly. On its edge was a flint

which was sparked by the trigger mechanism releasing the pressurized oil vapour which was shot from the heated vat in the base of the weapon.

He heard a voice coming to him from the melee near the broken tower. It was Yusuf. ‘That’s it! Get the ships with Greek Fire,’ he was yelling. ‘I like the way you think, Ezio!’

Across the Horn, on the north bank, the Ottoman Guard were bringing up two cannon, which they trained on the Assassins fighting near Ezio. Soon afterwards, as Ezio was cranking the flamethrower round and training it on the nearest ships, he saw the puffs of smoke from the cannons’ mouths, then heard the *crump* of their detonations. The first cannonball fell short of where he was into the water, but the second smashed into the jetty, making it lurch dangerously.

But it did not collapse.

Ezio steadied himself and pressed the trigger. With a loud roar, a long tongue of flame instantly shot forth, and he played it across the yards and decks of the three ships riding between him and Piri’s dhow. Fire sprang up in a moment. Ezio kept pressing the trigger until all the oil in the tank was used up then, abandoning the weapon, he leapt down onto one of the barges riding beneath the jetty, sprinting its length and vaulting from it to catch hold of the outer gunwale of the first burning ship, hauling himself up onto the deck with his hookblade and there managing to fight off two desperate sailors who came towards him with belaying pins. He scaled the foremast from the burning deck and was just in time to zipline down a yard and hurl himself from it onto the second ship in line before the mast behind him snapped in the fire and collapsed in a chaos of flame onto the deck of the ship he’d just left.

The second ship, too, was burning fiercely and beginning to sink at the after end. He ran towards the prow, pushing aside a handful of panicking mariners, and along its bowsprit to leap from there to the third ship, less damaged than the first two, where the crew was preparing to turn their cannon onto the red dhow, now only twenty yards distant. To Ezio’s alarm, he saw Piri shouting orders to make sail. His sailors were letting out the sheets frantically in order to catch the wind and get out of firing range.

Ezio raised his voice and called for aid from the Brotherhood. When he looked round he saw that a number of his fellow Assassins had already followed his perilous route and were right behind him, ready to pounce. Between them, they set on the gun crews and a fierce and bloody skirmish followed, leaving several Assassins and all the mariners on the blockade ship dead. On the red dhow, Piri had raised an arm to halt operations and was bellowing to Ezio to make haste, though his voice was lost in the tumult over the cannon.

At last Ezio stood at the gunwale of the blockade ship. He used his crossbow to fire a line over to the dhow, which Piri's crew secured, and then he ziplined across the choppy water. Behind him, the surviving Assassins waved their farewells before taking to the doomed ship's boats and making for the shore.

Ezio saluted back, catching his breath and wheezing a little. He flexed his joints, which were just a little stiff. Then he was surrounded by a handful of Piri's men, who checked him over for wounds and conducted him to the wheelhouse, where Piri stood before the now fully unfurled foresail.

'You took your time,' said Piri Reis, with a broad grin which was not unmixed with concern.

'Yes. Sorry for the delay.'

The men at the prow were already hauling up the anchors and, moments later, the dhow picked up the wind and made its way, gingerly but unimpeded, past rows of burning blockade ships. The wind which carried them forward had also seen to it that the fire started by Ezio had spread, and they'd been anchored too close together for safety.

'Lucky I was upwind of that lot,' Piri said. 'But I expect you noticed that from the beginning.'

'Naturally,' Ezio said.

'Well,' said Piri, as the red dhow eased out of the Horn and into the Bosphorus, steering a southbound course. 'This should be an interesting trip.'

Part Two

And what I heard reminded me of when
You hear a choir, raised with an organ's chant –
At times the words are clear,
At times, they're lost.

– Dante, *Purgatorio*

58

At Mersin, Ezio took his leave of the Turkish admiral. The sun sparkled on the sea.

‘May Allah protect you, my friend,’ said the seafarer.

‘My thanks, Piri Reis.’

‘I will await your return here. But I cannot stay forever.’

‘I know.’

‘Will you not take some of my men with you?’

‘No – it is best that I travel alone.’

‘Then at least allow me to arrange a horse for you. You will travel faster, and more safely.’

‘I would be grateful for that.’

‘You are a brave man, Ezio Auditore, and a worthy follower of the great Mentor, Altaïr.’

‘You do me too much honour.’ Ezio looked inland, his face set. ‘If I have not returned within two courses of the moon …’

Piri Reis nodded, gravely. ‘Go with whichever god guides you,’ he said, as they shook hands in farewell.

The two-week voyage was followed by a further two-week trek north, first across the Taurus Mountains then, after breaking his journey at Nigde, between the Taurus and the Melendiz ranges, north again through the low brown hills to Derinkuyu, where Ezio knew Manuel Palaiologos’ rebel army was massing.

He broke his journey again in the grim little village of Nadarim, within sight of the city which was his goal. The foulness of the place contrasted with the beautiful countryside in which it was situated. Few people were about as it was just before dawn, and the few who were eyed Ezio warily as he rode into the central square, which was flanked on one side by a church.

There was no sign here of any military activity and Ezio, after having stabled his horse, decided to scale the church’s belltower, to get a better view of Derinkuyu itself.

He peered through the lightening sky with eagle eyes, scanning the low buildings which comprised the not far distant city, a few spires piercing its profile. But there was no obvious sign of any garrison there either.

But, as he knew, there could be a reason for that.

He descended again. The square was deserted, and Ezio was immediately on his guard. His intention had been to ride on, but now he wondered if it would be safe to retrieve his horse. His suspicions mounted as he spied a figure lurking in the shadows of the neglected church walls. He decided to approach.

As he did so, the figure spun round to face him, brandishing a dagger. It was a young woman. Tough, wiry, tanned. Almost feral.

'Not so close, *adi herif*!' she growled.

Ezio raised his hands. 'Who are you calling a pig?' he asked, calmly. He saw doubt flicker in her eyes.

'Who are you? One of Manuel's scum?'

'Easy, now. Tarik sent me.'

The girl hesitated, then lowered her blade. 'Who are you?'

'Auditore, Ezio.'

She relaxed some more. 'We had word from the young prince,' she said. 'I am Dilara, Tarik's principal agent here. Why have they only sent you? Why not more? Did they not get my reports in Kostantiniyye?'

'I am enough.' Ezio looked around. 'Where are your people?'

Dilara spat. 'Captured by Byzantines over a week ago. I was dressed to look like a slave, and managed to escape. But the others …' She trailed off, shaking her head. Then darted him a glance. 'Are you a capable fighter?'

'I like to think so.'

'When you've made up your mind, come and find me. In the town over there. I'll be waiting by the west gate to the underground city.'

She flashed her teeth at him and whisked away, fast as a lizard.

59

Ezio equipped himself with his pistol on his left wrist, his hidden blade on his right, and a brace of smoke bombs clipped to his belt. He kept the hookblade in his pack.

He found Dilara waiting at the appointed place two hours later. The gate she had mentioned was large, iron-bound and shut.

She greeted him curtly and began without further preamble, ‘The Byzantines took my men into this cave system some days ago. From what I can tell, this gate is the least protected of the lot. Every so often the soldiers bring refuse through here, but it is deserted most of the time.’

‘So – we sneak in, free your men, and lead them out through here?’

‘Exactly …’

Ezio tried the door. It didn’t budge. He turned to Dilara with a disappointed smirk, feeling sheepish.

‘I was going on to say, after you unlock it from the inside,’ Dilara concluded, drily.

‘Of course.’

‘Come with me.’

She led the way to where they had sight of another larger gate made of a huge circular stone which could be rolled open and closed in a stone track. It opened as they watched. Soldiers emerged, and formed ranks before marching off on patrol.

‘The main entrance is there, at the foot of that hill. But it is well guarded.’

‘Wait here,’ said Ezio.

‘Where are you going?’

‘I need to get a feel for this place.’

‘You’ll need a guide.’

‘Why?’

‘It’s a warren. You see those towers?’

‘Yes.’

‘Ventilator shafts. And water conduits. There are eleven floors of the city and they go down three hundred feet.’

‘I’ll manage.’

‘You’re an arrogant man.’

‘No. I am cautious. And I am not unprepared. I know this place was made by Phrygians fifteen hundred years ago, and I know a little of its geography.’

‘Then you’ll also know what’s down there: an underground river system at the very bottom, and above it, on ten more levels, churches, schools, shops, stores, stables even and room for fifty thousand people.’

‘Big enough to conceal a garrison, in fact.’

Dilara looked at him. ‘You’ll need a guide,’ she repeated.

‘I need somebody here.’

‘Then go with God,’ she said. ‘But be quick. As soon as the patrols have all come out, they’ll roll the gate closed again. With luck you’ll be able to get in with the supply wagons over there. I’ll wait by the west gate.’

Ezio nodded, and silently took his leave.

He blended in with the local Byzantine people, who seemed less than happy with the new military presence in their midst. He managed to pass through the gate without difficulty, walking alongside an ox-cart.

The torch-lit interior illuminated yellowish-beige walls of soft volcanic rock, besmirched with the soot of ages, and yet the air was fresh. The streets – if you could call the broad, grimy corridors that – were alive with soldiers and citizens, jostling one another as they went about their business. Ezio made his way among them, penetrating ever deeper into the underground city’s interior.

At last, on the second level below ground, he came upon a spacious hall with a barrel-vaulted roof, decorated with faded frescoes. He made his way along one of the galleries and looked down on the figures in the main room twenty feet below him. The acoustics were good, and he was easily able to hear what the two men there were saying to one another. He had recognized them immediately: the portly figure of Manuel Palaiologos, and the gaunt one of Shahkulu. Near them, a group of guards stood to attention. Ezio noted a broad tunnel leading off westwards – possibly a route to the west gate which Dilara had shown him earlier.

‘How soon before my soldiers are trained to use those guns?’ Manuel was asking.

‘A few weeks at most,’ replied the dour Türkmeni.

Manuel looked thoughtful. ‘The main Janissary force will know I have betrayed them by now. But do they have the resources for retribution?’

‘Doubtful. The Sultan’s war with Selim commands most of their attention.’

Manuel began to laugh – but his laugh quickly turned to coughing and gagging. ‘Ah!’ he gasped. ‘What the hell is that smell? Have the ventilators been blocked?’

‘Apologies, Manuel. Perhaps the wind has changed. Some of the Ottoman prisoners we took a week or so ago turned out to be … so fragile. We had to put them somewhere after they met with their unfortunate … accident.’

Manuel was almost amused by this, but also worried. ‘Shahkulu, try to moderate your anger. I know the Sultan humiliated your people. But there is no need to spit on men who are below us.’

‘Humiliated my people!’ Shahkulu shouted. ‘He tried to crush us as if we were so many roaches! That is why I sided with Ismail of Persia and took the name “Shahkulu” – servant of the Shah. Under that name, I will prevail against whatever the Seljuks try to throw against the Turkmen people, and those of us who follow the Safavid and the law of Shia.’

‘Of course, of course – but nevertheless, get rid of the evidence,’ said Manuel, taking his leave, a scented handkerchief pressed to his nose.

Shahkulu sullenly watched him go, then snapped his fingers at the remaining bodyguards. ‘You three – gather the corpses and dump them outside on the western dunghill.’

The sergeant of the guard looked nervous. ‘Shahkulu, I don’t have the key to the west gate,’ he stammered.

Shahkulu exploded with rage. ‘Then find it, idiot!’ he bellowed, storming off.

Left alone, the guards looked at one another.

‘Who has the key? Any idea?’ said the sergeant, testily. He didn’t like being called an idiot in front of his men, and he didn’t like their smirks, either.

‘I think Nikolos has it,’ said one of them. ‘He’s on leave today.’

‘Then he’ll be at the market on Level Three,’ put in the other soldier.

‘Stuffing his face, no doubt,’ groused the first man. ‘*Hristé mou!* I’d like to run Shahkulu through with a spear!’

‘Hey, hey!’ said the sergeant severely. ‘Keep that to yourself, *edáxi*?’

Ezio barely heard the last words. He was already on his way to the market, one floor below.

60

Apart from the fact that its hall was deep underground, the market was much as any other – stalls selling meat, vegetables, spices – whose odours were everywhere, even denser here than they would have been in the open air – clothes, shoes – whatever the people needed. And there were little tavernas and wine shops. Near one of them, in an open space, a drunken scrap had broken out – evidently over a light-skinned whore. A bony older woman, who sat elegantly on a chair at one of the wine shop tables, was clearly enjoying the spectacle.

A circle had formed around the two men who were throwing punches at one another, the bystanders egging them on with ragged shouts of encouragement. Ezio joined its outer edges.

‘Give him one!’

‘Hit him!’

‘Kill the bastard!’

‘Is that all you’ve got?’

‘Blood! Blood!’

‘Mangle him!’

Among the watchers, most of whom were as drunk as the brawlers, was a fat, red-faced soldier with a scruffy beard and a receding chin, holding a wineskin and roaring along with the rest of them. Ezio had already noticed the unclasped leather wallet on his belt, and could see the bow of a large iron key protruding from it. He glanced around and saw the three guards from the painted hall approaching through the market on the far side.

No time to lose. He sidled up to the fat soldier from behind and plucked the key from the wallet just as his fellow soldiers hailed him by name.

Nikolos would have a lot of explaining to do, thought Ezio, as he made his way back to the Second Level, and the tunnel from which the stench had emanated – the tunnel which, he guessed, led to the west gate.

61

‘You took your time,’ said Dilara, in a harsh whisper, as Ezio unlocked the west gate from the inside, and let her in.

‘You’re welcome,’ muttered Ezio, grimly.

Dilara then did exactly as Ezio had expected: her hand shot to her face. ‘*Aman Allahim!* What is that?’

Ezio stepped back and indicated a pile of dead bodies, piled in a broad niche just inside the doorway. ‘Not everyone was taken prisoner.’

Dilara rushed forward towards the heap, then stopped short, staring. ‘Poor men! God keep them!’ Her shoulders dropped as her spirits sank. She seemed a little more human, under the fierce façade she maintained. ‘That Türkmeni renegade Shahkulu did this, I know,’ she continued.

Ezio nodded.

‘I’ll kill him!’

She ran off.

‘Wait!’ Ezio called after her, but it was too late. She was already gone.

Ezio set off after her, and found her at length in a secluded spot overlooking a small public square. He approached with care. She had her back to him and was staring at something happening in the square, still invisible to him.

‘You aren’t very good at cooperation,’ he said as he came up.

She didn’t turn. ‘I’m here to rescue what remains of my men,’ she said coldly. ‘Not to make friends.’

‘You don’t have to be friends to cooperate,’ said Ezio, drawing closer. ‘But it would help to know where your men were, and I can help you find them.’

He was interrupted by an anguished scream and hurried up to join the Turkish spy. Her face had hardened.

‘Right there,’ she said, pointing.

Ezio followed the direction of her finger and saw, in the square, a number of Ottoman prisoners seated on the ground, their hands bound. As they watched, one of them was thrown to the ground by Byzantine guards. There was a makeshift gallows nearby, and from it another Ottoman hung from his wrists, with his arms bent behind him. Near him stood Shahkulu, instantly recognizable

despite the executioner's mask he wore. The man screamed as Shahkulu delivered blow after blow to his body.

'It's Janos,' Dilara said to Ezio, turning to him at last. 'We must help him!'

Ezio looked closely at what was going on. 'I have a gun, but I can't use it,' he said. 'The body armour he's wearing is too thick for bullets.' He paused. 'I'll have to get in close.'

'There's little time. This isn't an interrogation. Shahkulu is torturing Janos to death. And then there'll be another. And another …'

She winced at each blow, each scream.

They could hear the laughter and the taunts of Shahkulu's men.

'I think I can see how we can do this,' said Ezio. He unhooked a smoke grenade from his belt. 'When I throw this, you go round to the right. See if you can start cutting the bonds of your men under cover of the smoke from this bomb.'

She nodded. 'And Shahkulu?'

'Leave him to me.'

'Just make sure you finish the rat.'

Ezio pulled the pin from the grenade, waited a moment for the smoke to start to gush, and threw it towards the gallows with a careful aim. The Byzantines thought they had made sure of all the opposition and were not expecting an attack. They were taken completely by surprise.

In the confusion, Ezio and Dilara bounded down the slope and into the square, splitting to right and left. Ezio shot down the first guard to come at him, and smashed another's jaw with the bracer on his left forearm. The he unleashed his hidden blade and moved in fast towards Shahkulu, who'd drawn a heavy scimitar, and was standing his ground, twisting to left and right, unsure of where the attack would come from. The moment his attention was diverted, Ezio leapt at him and plunged his blade into the top of his chest between the jawline of the mask and his body armour. Dark blood bubbled forth around his fist as he kept the blade where it was. Shahkulu fell, Ezio holding onto him and falling with him, ending up kneeling over the man, whose struggles were losing their violence. His eyes closed.

'Men who make a fetish out of murder deserve no pity,' Ezio said, his lips close to the man's ear.

But then Shahkulu's eyes sprang open in a manic stare, and a mailed fist shot to Ezio's throat, gripping it tightly. Shahkulu started to laugh crazily. As he did so, the blood pumped out faster from his wound, and Ezio rammed the blade in harder and twisted it viciously. With a last spasm, Shahkulu thrust Ezio from

him, sending him sprawling in the dust. Then his back arched in his death agony, a rattle sounded in his throat and he fell back, inert.

Ezio picked himself up and cleaned his blade on Shahkulu's cloak. Dilara had already cut some of her men free and Ezio was in time to see her throw herself on the back of the last, fleeing Byzantine survivor, bringing him down and slicing his throat open in one clean movement. She jumped back from the kill, landing like a cat, and turned to her rescued troops.

Ezio gave Shahkulu's body a kick, to be sure, this time, that he was dead. Dilara was pulling her men to their feet.

'Bless you, Dilara,' said Janos, as she cut him down.

'Can you walk?'

'I think so.'

Ezio came up. 'Was yours the detachment that brought the guns for Manuel?'

She nodded.

'Then they must be destroyed.'

She nodded again. 'But most of them don't actually work. The gunpowder's real enough though – we couldn't fake that.'

'*Bene*,' said Ezio. He looked at the Ottomans standing round him. 'Get yourselves out of sight until you hear the explosions, then run!'

'Explosions?' said Dilara. 'If you do that, all hell will break loose. You will panic the entire city.'

'I'm counting on that,' replied Ezio. 'The explosions will destroy whatever good guns there are, and as for the panic, it can only help us.'

Dilara considered this. 'All right. I'll take my men to a place of safety. But what about you?'

'After the explosions have gone off, I'm going after Manuel Palaiologos.'

62

There were great vaults in the underground city – vast man-made caverns where the gunpowder and arms caches for Manuel's army were stored. A system of block and tackle pulley systems for transporting powder kegs on taut ropeways from one place to another had been set up and, as Ezio watched from a vantage point in a gallery he had reached on the Fifth Level, he saw groups of Byzantine civilians engaged in just such activity, under the watchful eye of Manuel's renegade troops. It was a perfect opportunity, and he thanked God that their security was so slack. They were obviously confident that they were under no threat of attack, and he had moved too fast to be overtaken by the discovery of Shahkulu's corpse and those of his fellow torturers.

He'd replaced his hidden blade with his hookblade, and reloaded his pistol. He got in amongst a group of workers, and watched as a barrel was manoeuvred down one of the ropes, between two sets of blocks and tackle. Around them, hundreds of barrels were piled on top of one another, and along the walls, wooden crates containing muskets were ranged.

'Steady, now! Steady!' an overseer was shouting. 'This is gunpowder, not millet!'

'Got it!' a man operating a winch called back.

Ezio surveyed his surroundings, planning. If he could manage to start one explosion in such a way that it would lead to a chain reaction along the three warehouse vaults he knew there to be …

It might just work.

As he roved between the halls, blending in with the workers, he listened carefully to their conversation to assess their mood. And in doing so, he discovered that not all Byzantines were villains. As usual, it was just the ones whose egos were too big, who were too hungry for power, who were to blame for everyone else's misfortune.

'It could be worse, you know,' one woman was saying to a male fellow worker.

'Worse? Worse than this?'

‘Better the turban of the Turk than the tiara of the Pope. At least the Ottomans have some respect for our Orthodox Church.’

‘Shh-h! If anyone heard you!’ warned another woman.

‘She’s crazy!’ The man turned to the first woman. ‘Listen to yourself!’

‘OK, so I’m crazy. And if you prefer forced labour, living underground like a mole, then fine!’

The man considered this. ‘Well, it’s certainly true that I don’t want to go to war. I just want to feed my family.’

Another man, an overseer dressed in Templar uniform, had overheard this, and put in, not altogether unsympathetically, ‘No one wants war, friend – but what can we do? Look at us! Look how we live! Those Turks took our land. Do you think we should just roll over without a fight?’

‘No, no,’ said the first man to speak. ‘I just – I don’t know. I’m just tired of this. We’re all so tired of fighting!’

Amen to that, thought Ezio, as he slipped away between two twenty-foot high tiers of barrels.

Once he was alone, he broached a barrel at ground level with the point of his scimitar and, after collecting a stream of powder in a leather pouch, he laid a trail down the aisle between the rows of barrels to the entrance of the second hall. He did the same thing there, and in the third hall, until the trail reached the arched door which led out of it. Then he waited patiently until all the ordinary workers had moved out of harm’s way for the night.

Only the guards remained.

Ezio made sure his retreat was assured, took up a position a few yards from the exit, unleashed his pistol and fired into the nearest barrel. Then he turned and ran.

The titanic series of explosions which followed rocked the foundations of the underground city like an earthquake. Ceilings crumbled and fell behind him as he fled. Everywhere, there was smoke, dust, rubble and chaos.

63

Ezio reached the great chamber on the Second Level at about the same time as Manuel, who stumbled in surrounded by a large force of crack guards. Ezio concealed himself behind a buttress, watched and waited. He was going to finish this tonight if he could. He'd seen that Manuel was holding the missing Masyaf key – the one which the Templars had unearthed beneath the Palace of Topkapi. If he had that with him, then the would-be next emperor of Byzantium must be planning his escape.

'What the hell is going on?' bellowed Manuel, half in anger, half in fear.

'Sabotage, Manuel,' said a Templar captain at his elbow. 'You need to take cover.'

A crowd of bawling, panicky people had filled one end of the chamber by now. Ezio watched Manuel as he stuffed the key into a satchel which was slung round his corpulent body, and elbowed the Templar officer aside. 'Get out of my way,' he snapped.

He clambered up onto a podium and addressed the crowd, which Ezio joined, edging through the throng, ever closer to his quarry as Manuel spoke.

'Citizens!' Manuel said in a high voice. 'Soldiers! Compose yourselves. Do not give in to fear! We are the true shepherds of Constantinopolis. We are the lords of this land. We are Byzantines!' He paused for effect, but if he'd hoped for applause, there was none. So he ploughed on. '*Kouráyo!* Have courage! Stand fast! Do not let anyone break your—'

He broke off as he noticed Ezio approaching. Some sixth sense must have triggered an alarm within him, for he swore sharply to himself, and jumped nimbly from the podium, hurrying away towards an exit at the back of the hall, yelling to his bodyguards as he did so, 'Stop that man! The tall one in the peaked hood! Cut him down!'

Ezio thrust his way through the confused mob and started off in pursuit of Manuel, dodging and knocking down Templar guards as he went. At last he was free of them, and glanced behind him. They were as confused as the townsfolk, looking in every direction but the one in which he'd gone, shouting challenges, barking orders and running off determinedly before checking themselves.

Manuel himself had scuttled off too fast for any of his men to have had time to follow him. Only Ezio's sharp eyes had not let him out of his sight.

For such a portly person, Manuel could certainly move. Ezio rushed down a long, dimly lit corridor-street, pausing only to glance down side turnings to assure himself that his quarry had not turned off. He caught a glimpse, far up ahead, of a shimmering silk robe catching the torchlight as Manuel scrambled up a narrow stone stairway cut into the rock, ascending to the First Level. The man who would be king was seeking the quickest way out, his munitions gone and his army in complete disarray.

Ezio stormed after him.

He cornered him at last in an empty house, carved out of the living rock on the First Level. Manuel turned to face him with a curious smile playing on his lascivious lips.

'Are you here for the Masyaf key?' he asked. 'Is that it? Have you come to rob us of two years of effort and recover what the Assassins threw away?'

Ezio did not reply, but eyed him warily. There was no telling what tricks this man might still have up his sleeve.

'You wage a losing battle, Assassin!' Manuel continued, though something of desperation was creeping into his voice. 'Our numbers are growing and our influence is expanding. We are hidden in plain sight!'

Ezio took a step closer.

'Stop and think for a moment,' Manuel said, holding up a beringed hand. 'Think about the lives you have disrupted today – that anarchy you have sown here! You! You take advantage of a poor and displaced people, using us to further your own vain quest! But we fight for dignity, Assassin! We fight to restore peace to this troubled land.'

'Templars are always quick to talk of peace,' Ezio replied, 'but very slow to concede power.'

Manuel made a dismissive gesture. 'That is because power begets peace. Idiot! It cannot happen in reverse. These people would drown without a firm hand to lift them up and keep them in line!'

Ezio smiled. 'And to think you are the monster I came here to kill.'

Manuel looked him in the eye, and Ezio had the disquieting impression that the man was resigned to his fate. There was a curious dignity about the plump, dandified figure, with his flashing jewels and his beautifully tended moustache. Ezio unleashed his blade and stabbed Manuel deep in the chest, finding himself helping the man down as he sank to his knees. But Manuel didn't fall. He supported himself on the back of a stone bench and looked at Ezio calmly. When

he spoke, his voice sounded exhausted, ‘I should have been Constantine’s successor. I had so many plans. Do you know how long I waited?’

‘Your dream dies with you, Manuel. Your empire has gone.’

Though clearly in pain, Manuel managed to sound amused. ‘Ah, but I am not the only one with this vision, Assassin. The dream of our Order is universal. Ottoman, Byzantine … these are only labels, costumes and façades. Beneath these trappings, all Templars are part of the same family.’

Ezio found himself losing patience; he was aware of time passing. He was not out of here himself, yet. ‘Enough prattling. I am here for the Masyaf key.’ He stooped and took the satchel Manuel still had slung round his shoulder. Manuel suddenly looked much older than his fifty-eight years.

‘Then take it,’ he said in pained amusement. ‘Take it and seek your fortune. See if you get within a hundred leagues of the Masyaf Archive before one of us finishes you off.’

Then his whole body stiffened, and he stretched his arms as if waking from sleep, before pitching forward into a blackness without dimension and without sound.

Ezio looked at the body for a moment, thinking his own thoughts, then rifled swiftly through Manuel’s satchel. He took nothing but the key, which he transferred to his own side-pouch, throwing the satchel down by Manuel’s side.

Then he turned to go.

64

The upper levels of the underground city had been sealed off by Templar and Byzantine troops, loyal to their officers and unsure of what might happen next. It would not be long before Manuel's body was discovered, and Ezio decided that his best – and perhaps his only – means of escape would be by way of the underground river system which occupied the Eleventh Level of the complex.

The lower levels of the Derinkuyu were like a hell on earth. Smoke and fumes filled the underground streets, and fires had broken out in pockets on levels both below and above the warehouses where Ezio had destroyed Manuel's armoury and munitions dump. Fallen ceilings and walls had blocked many routes, and Ezio had to make frequent detours. Several times, as he passed piles of rubble, he could see the limbs of those crushed by collapsing stonework protruding from the debris. He tried, and failed, to close his mind to the consequences of what he had done. Soldiers and citizens alike wandered about in a kind of daze, scarves and handkerchiefs pressed to their faces, eyes streaming. Ezio, himself fighting to breathe at times, doggedly pressed on downwards using a series of ramps, corridors and stairways cut into the rock until he reached the lowest level of all.

It was clearer here, and the dank smell of water in a confined space had begun to reach him even as he reached the Ninth Level.

Because of the tumult and confusion caused by the explosions, Ezio had been able to pass through the city unmolested, and he now stood alone on a jetty by an artificial underground lake. Far away to what he imagined must be the south, for it was difficult to keep one's bearings down here, he saw a glimmer of light where the river feeding the lake led away from it again towards the open air. It had to be a long way away and far downhill from the site of Derinkuyu. Ezio had no time to ponder this, because, setting off from another jetty perhaps twenty yards distant, he saw a raft, manned by half a dozen Byzantine sailors. But it was the passenger who really caught Ezio's attention. An elegant, bearded man standing on the after deck.

Prince Ahmet Osman.

Ahmet had seen Ezio too, and directed his oarsmen to make way towards him. When he came within close enough range to speak, he called mockingly to the

Assassin.

‘Poor Manuel. The last of the Palaiologi.’

Ezio was too surprised to speak for a moment. Then he said, ‘News travels fast.’

‘The Assassins aren’t the only ones with spies.’ Ahmet shrugged. ‘But I should not have put Manuel in charge of our Masyaf expedition. He was an arrogant man. Impossible to keep in line.’

‘You disappoint me, Ahmet. Why the Templars?’

‘Well, Ezio – or should I keep up the pretence and continue to call you “Marcello”? – it is like this: I am tired of all the pointless blood feuds which have pitted father against son and brother against brother. To achieve true peace, mankind must think and move as one body with one master mind.’ He paused. ‘The secrets in the Grand Temple will give us just that. And Altaïr will lead us to it.’

‘You delude yourself! Altaïr’s secrets are not for you! And you will never find the Grand Temple!’

‘We’ll see.’

Ezio noticed that Ahmet was looking past him and, turning, saw a number of Byzantine troops edging towards where he stood on the jetty.

‘In any case, I am not interested in arguing morals and ethics with you, Assassin. I am here for the Masyaf keys.’

Ezio smiled mockingly and produced the key he had just taken from Manuel, holding it up. ‘Do you mean to say there are more than just this one?’

‘So I have heard,’ replied Ahmet, urbanely. ‘But perhaps I should ask someone who may be even better informed than you. Sofia Sartor. Have I got the name right?’

Ezio was immediately troubled, though he tried not to let it show. ‘She knows nothing! Leave her be!’

Ahmet smiled. ‘We shall see.’

He motioned to his men, who started to steer the raft away.

‘I will kill you if you touch her.’

‘I know you’ll try, my dear Ezio. But I doubt if you’ll succeed.’ He raised his voice, addressing the men onshore, ‘Kill him now, and get the key. Then bring it to me immediately.’

‘Won’t you stay and watch the show?’ said Ezio, coldly.

‘I have far too much respect for my own safety,’ replied Ahmet. ‘I know your reputation, and I’ve seen an example of your work here today. Cornered as you are, I imagine you’re doubly dangerous. Besides, I detest violence.’

The raft sailed off, leaving Ezio to face the Byzantine troops ranged against him. He considered his options.

But there were no options.

He was at the end of the jetty, with no means of retreat, and there was no way he could make an escape by swimming. There must have been twenty or thirty of them. Some carried muskets which had escaped his destruction of the warehouses. The captain of the detachment came close.

'Give us the key, *kyrie*,' he said sarcastically. 'I do not believe you have a choice.'

Musketeers flanking him raised their weapons.

Ezio looked at them. This time he knew he was beaten. He had his pistol, capable of two shots at most, his hidden blade and his scimitar. But even making his quickest move, the muskets would send their balls straight through him. Perhaps they'd fire anyway; it would be the simplest way to get the key. Maybe he'd have time to hurl it into the lake before he fell.

Ezio could only pray that Yusuf would never let the other four keys fall into Templar hands and that Sofia would be spared needless torture, for he had kept her ignorant of their whereabouts for her own safety's sake.

But he had clearly not been careful enough.

Well, everyone's road had to end somewhere.

The captain raised his hand, and the musketeers' fingers curled round their triggers.

65

As the muskets fired, Ezio threw himself flat on the jetty.

Arrows from behind and above them fell on the Byzantine soldiers like rain. In seconds, all Prince Ahmet's soldiers lay dead or wounded by the lake's edge.

One ball had seared Ezio's hood, but otherwise he was unscathed, and he thanked God that age hadn't slowed his reactions. When he got to his feet, it was to see Dilara standing at the other end of the jetty. From vantage points at the top of the stairway which led down to it, her men were descending. Those who'd already reached ground level were moving among the Byzantines, checking the dead and tending the wounded.

'Can't leave you alone for a minute,' said Dilara.

'So it would seem,' said Ezio. 'Thank you.'

'Get what you came for?'

'Yes.'

'Then we'd better get you out of here. You've raised hell, you know.'

'Looks like it.'

She shook her head. 'It'll take them years to recover from this. If they recover at all. But there's enough kick left in them to send you flying if they find you. Come on!'

She started back up the stairs.

'Wait! Shouldn't I take a boat out of here?'

'Are you mad? They'll be waiting for you where the river comes out into the open. It's a narrow gorge. You'd be dead meat in a moment, and I don't want to see my work here wasted.'

Ezio followed her obediently.

They climbed back up through several levels and then took a street winding away to the south. The smoke here had cleared somewhat, and those people who were about were too preoccupied with putting out fires to pay them much attention. Dilara set a very brisk pace and before long they'd arrived at a gateway similar to the one Ezio had opened on the west side of the city. She produced a key and opened the ironclad wooden door.

'I'm impressed,' said Ezio.

‘So you should be. Tell them in Kostantiniyye that they can rest easy that their people here are doing a good job.’

Ezio squinted against the sunlight that poured in through the door, which seemed blinding after the dimness of the underground city. He saw a road winding away to the south with the dismal little village of Nadarim hunched in its path.

‘Your horse is saddled and freshly fed and watered in the stables there. Food and drink in the saddlebags. You can pick her up without danger. The village has been liberated and they’ve already started whitewashing the buildings – Allah knows it needed cheering up, and now it’s broken free of its oppressors,’ said Dilara, her nostrils flaring in triumph. ‘But get out of here. It won’t be long before news reaches Ahmet of what’s happened. He won’t dare come back himself of course, but you can be sure he’ll send someone after you.’

‘Has he got anyone left?’

Dilara smiled – a little tightly, but she did smile. ‘Go on, go. You should be able to make Nigde by the end of the week. You’ll be back in Mersin by full moon if nobody cuts you down on the way.’

‘Ahead of schedule.’

‘Congratulations.’

‘What about you?’

‘Our work here isn’t finished. In any case, we don’t move without a direct order from Kostantiniyye. Give my regards to Tarik.’

Ezio looked at her in grim silence for a moment, then said, ‘I’ll tell them at the Sublime Porte, the seat of the Ottoman parliament, how much they owe to you.’

‘You do that. And now I’ve got to get back to my men and reorganize. Your little firework display wrecked our headquarters, among other things.’

Ezio wanted to say something more, but she had already gone.

66

The journey back to the coast was fast and mercifully uneventful.

‘You’re early,’ said Piri Reis, when Ezio appeared at the foot of the gangplank of the red dhow.

‘And it’s good that I am. We must return to Kostantiniyye as soon as possible.’

‘Do you have the fifth key?’

Ezio smiled, and patted the pouch at his side.

‘It is well,’ said Piri, returning his smile. ‘And Manuel?’

‘Manuel will trouble us no more.’

‘Better and better. They will make you a *sövalye* at this rate.’

‘The battle is far from won. We must make haste.’

‘The ship has to be victualled and we must wait for a favourable tide. But we can deal with one while we attend to the other.’ Piri turned, and issued terse orders to the ship’s master, who had joined them. ‘The crew will have to be rounded up as well. We did not expect you to finish your business at Derinkuyu quite so fast.’

‘I was fortunate in having extraordinarily good assistance.’

‘I have heard of the chief of spies put in place there by the Sublime Porte. Her reputation goes always before her,’ said Piri.

‘Then I have reason to thank the Ottoman government.’

‘Under Bayezid, the Sublime Porte has become a model of practical administration. It is fortunate that it continues to operate unhindered by the squabbles of the Royal Family.’

‘Speaking of them, I think we must keep a careful eye on Ahmet,’ Ezio said quietly. ‘I have discovered that he has some very undesirable friends.’

‘The Assassins should not meddle in Ottoman affairs.’

‘These friends of Ahmet’s make those affairs ours too.’

Piri raised an eyebrow, but said no more on the subject. ‘Your cabin is ready for you,’ he said. ‘No doubt you will wish to rest until we are ready to sail.’

Once alone, Ezio divested himself of his equipment, and cleaned and honed his arms. When all was in readiness, he secured the cabin door, took out the fifth key and placed it on the foldaway table, seating himself before it. He was curious to see whether it would behave in the same way as the others. He needed to know what more of Altaïr it might impart, especially as he had no means of telling whether it had performed any kind of mystical revelation to the Templars who had first discovered it. What knowledge might it already have imparted to them? Or had it some power to know, as it were, when to speak, and when to be silent?

His mind was troubled, too, by thoughts of Sofia, and he was impatient to be back in Constantinople to protect her and to ensure the safety of the other four keys. But for now he had to force himself to be patient, for he was at the mercy of the sea and the wind.

This key was similar to the others – the exact diameter and proportion of its fellows, decorated, as they were, with strange, indecipherable symbols and rutted with precise but mysterious grooves. He braced himself, and reached out to touch it. It did not disappoint him. Soon, the soft light of the cabin seemed to sink into further gloom and, by contrast, the glow which began to emanate from the obsidian disc grew greater and greater …

67

As he was drawn into the scene – at one with it and yet not part of it at all, Ezio knew that ten more years had passed since last he was at Masyaf. He watched, and as he watched, was lost in the events that unfolded …

The men stood in the sunlit inner bailey of Masyaf under the shade of a spreading cinnamon tree of great age.

Altaïr, his skin like paper and his gaunt frame so shrouded in his clothes that only his face and his long pale hands were visible, stood with two stocky Venetians in their early thirties. The older of the two wore a crest on his sleeve – a blue shield on which, in yellow, was a jug surmounted by a single chevron over which three pentangle stars were set in a row, the whole topped by a silver helm. A little way beyond where they were standing, a large number of Assassin warriors were in the process of preparing for battle.

The Mentor touched the man's sleeve in a familiar, friendly way. His movements were performed in the careful and precise manner of the very old, but there was nothing of the feebleness you might expect in a man of ninety-one winters, especially one from whom life had exacted so much. 'Niccolò,' said Altaïr, 'we have long held the Polo family – you and your brother here – close to our hearts, though our time spent together was, I know, brief enough. But I have faith that this Codex, which I now place in your hands, will answer the many questions you have yet to ask.'

Altaïr gestured to an aide, who stepped forward to place a leather-bound volume in Niccolò Polo's hands.

'Altaïr,' said the Italian, 'this gift is … invaluable. *Grazie*.'

Altaïr nodded in acknowledgement as the aide now handed him a small bag. 'So,' he said, turning back to the elder Polo brother, 'where will you go next?'

'Maffeo and I will return to Constantinople for a time. We intend to establish a guild there before returning to Venice.'

Altaïr smiled. 'Your son, Marco, will be eager to hear his father's wild stories.'

‘At three, he is a little young for such tales. But one day soon, yes indeed, he will hear them.’

They were interrupted by the arrival of Darim, who came rushing through the inner gate towards them.

‘Father! A vanguard of Hulagu’s Mongols has broken through! The village is threatened!’

‘So soon?’ Altaïr stiffened. His tone when he spoke again to Niccolò was urgent. ‘Niccolò – your cargo and provisions are waiting for you by the village gate. We will escort you there. Then you must make all speed.’

‘Thank you, Mentor.’

Altaïr turned to two Assassins who had detached themselves from the larger group, all now in full readiness for the battle ahead and already riding out.

‘Prepare the catapults,’ he ordered, ‘and watch for my signal.’

They bowed their assent and ran off to do as he bid.

‘Stay close,’ Altaïr commanded the Polo brothers.

‘We must make our way to the village immediately, Father,’ Darim said. ‘I think you had better remain with Niccolò and Maffeo. I will clear the path ahead.’

‘Take care, Darim. And keep an eye on the trebuchets.’ Altaïr looked over to where the massive sling-mounted catapults were being pulled into place by their crews.

Darim smiled. ‘If they hit me, they will hit a dozen Mongols at the same time.’

‘Khan Hulagu is not an enemy to be trifled with.’

‘We are ready for him.’

Altaïr turned to his guests. ‘Come,’ he said.

They mounted the horses which had been readied for them and rode out of the fortress at an easy pace, taking a route well clear of the main battle, which had been joined on the slopes of the nearby foothills.

‘Will you hold them?’ asked Niccolò, unable to disguise the nervousness in his voice.

‘For as long as necessary,’ Altaïr reassured him, calmly. ‘I envy you your journey,’ he continued, ‘Byzantium is a splendid city.’

Niccolò smiled tightly, for he was more than a little aware of the danger they were in, however little Altaïr seemed to be making of it. But he’d been in tough corners before, and he knew what Altaïr was trying to do – make light of it. He played the game. ‘You prefer the ancient name, I see. Have you ever been there?’

‘Long ago. When you Venetians diverted the Frankish crusaders to attack it instead of Jerusalem.’

‘Constantinople was Venice’s greatest trade rival then. It was a great coup.’

‘It opened Europe to the east in more ways than one.’

‘The Mongols will never get that far,’ said Niccolò, but his voice was nervous.

Altaïr didn’t pick him up on that. Instead he said, ‘That little conflict in 1204 prevented me from bringing the Creed to Europe.’

‘Well, with luck – and patience – we will finish what you started.’

‘If you have the chance, the view from the top of Hagia Sofia is the best in the city.’

‘How does one get to the top?’

Altaïr smiled. ‘With training and patience.’ He paused. ‘I take it that when you get away from here you won’t try the overland route there? That you’ll be sailing to Byzantium?’

‘Yes. We’ll ride to Latakia and get a ship there. The roads in Anatolia are fogged by memories of the crusades.’

‘Ah,’ said Altaïr, ‘the deepest passions can be the most deadly.’

‘Do visit us if you are able, Altaïr. We will have plenty of space for you and your entourage.’

‘No,’ said Altaïr. ‘Thank you, but that is no country for old men, Niccolò. I will stay here, as I always must, now.’

‘Well, should you change you mind, our door is always open.’

Altaïr was watching the battle. The trebuchets had been brought into play and had found their range. The stones they were hurling into the Mongol ranks were wreaking havoc.

A rider detached himself from the main body of Assassin cavalry and came towards them at the gallop. It was Darim.

‘We will rest briefly at the village,’ said Altaïr to him as he rode up. ‘You seem to have the enemy in check.’

‘But for how long, Father?’

‘I have every faith in you. After all, you are not a boy any longer.’

‘I am sixty-two years old.’

‘You make me feel quite ancient,’ Altaïr joked. But Darim could see the pallor on his cheeks, and realized how tired his father really was.

‘Of course, we will rest, and see our friends off properly.’

They rode round to the village stables and the Polo brothers made haste to transfer their belongings to the pack-horses provided for them, together with the two fresh mounts for their journey westwards to the coast. Altaïr, finally able to rest, slumped a little and leant against Darim for support.

‘Father – are you hurt?’ asked Darim in a voice of concern and escorted him to a bench under a tree.

‘Give me a moment,’ panted Altaïr, reluctant to give in to the pain he felt. He sat heavily and took a breath, looking back to the castle. An aged man, he thought, was nothing but a paltry thing, like a tattered cloak upon a stick, but he had at least let his soul clap its hands and sing.

‘The end of an era,’ he whispered.

He looked at his son, and smiled. He took the bag which the aide had handed him earlier, and took out its contents. Five obsidian discs, intricately carved. He stacked them neatly. ‘When I was very young,’ he said, ‘I was foolish enough to believe that our Creed would bring an end to these conflicts.’ He paused. ‘If only I had possessed the humility to say to myself, I have done enough for one life. I have done my part.’ With an effort he rose to his feet. ‘Then again, there is no greater glory than fighting to find the truth.’ He looked across the village and beyond it to the battle.

Niccolò Polo came up. ‘We are ready,’ he said.

‘A last favour, Niccolò,’ said Altaïr, giving him the stone discs. ‘Take these with you and guard them well. Hide them, if you must.’

Niccolò gave him a quizzical look.

‘What are these – artefacts?’

‘They are indeed artefacts of a kind. They are keys, each one of them imbued with a message.’

Niccolò examined one closely. He was puzzled. ‘A message – for whom?’

Altaïr took the key in his hand. ‘I wish I knew …’

He raised the key high. It began to glow. He closed his eyes, lost in concentration.

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Ezio became aware of where he was once more. The light in the cabin resumed its normal comfortable dimness. He smelt the cedar wood of its walls and fittings, saw the dust motes in the sunlight which came through the porthole, and heard the sounds of running feet on the decks, the cries of the sailors and the creak of the yards as the sails were hoisted.

They were under way.

Out at sea, they saw the sail of a Barbary pirate, which made both Ezio and Piri think of their old friend, al-Scarab, but the pirate ship stood off and did not attack them. For most of the fifteen-day voyage they were alone on the wine-dark, mackerel-crowded water, and Ezio spent his time vainly attempting to decipher the symbols on the key, wishing Sofia were there to help him, worrying about her safety, and becoming increasingly impatient to reach their goal.

But at last the day dawned when the domes, the cloud-capped towers, the walls, belltowers and minarets of Constantinople appeared low on the horizon.

'We'll be there by mid-afternoon,' said Piri Reis.

'The sooner the better.'

The port was as crowded as ever, though it was a humid and oppressive day, and siesta time. There was a particularly dense mob around a herald, who stood on a podium at the shore end of the main quay. He was attended by a squad of Janissaries in their flowing white robes. While the red dhow was unloading, Ezio walked over to listen to what the man had to say.

'Citizens of the empire and travellers from foreign lands, take heed! By order of the Janissaries, new restrictions now apply to all who travel to and from the city. I hereby give notice that a reward of ten thousand *akçe* will be given, without question, to anyone who brings information that leads to the immediate arrest of the Assassin, Auditore, Ezio.'

Ezio looked back at Piri Reis and exchanged a glance with him. Piri came over discreetly.

'Make your best way out of here,' he said. 'Have you your key with you?'

‘Yes.’

‘Then take your weapons and go. I’ll take care of the rest of your gear.’

Nodding his thanks, Ezio slipped quickly through the crowd and into the town.

He made his way by an indirect route to Sofia’s shop, checking every so often that he had not been followed or recognized. When he was close, he started to feel both relief and pleasurable anticipation. But when he turned the corner of her street, he was brought up short. The shop door stood wide open, a small crowd was gathered nearby, and a group of Yusuf’s Assassins, including Dogan and Kasim, stood on guard.

Ezio crossed to them quickly, his throat dry. ‘What is going on?’ he asked Kasim.

‘Inside,’ said Kasim, tersely. Ezio saw that there were tears in his eyes.

He entered the shop. Inside, it looked much as it had been when he last left it, but on reaching the inner courtyard, his heart all but stopped at the sight which confronted him.

Lying across a bench, face down, lay Yusuf. The hilt of a dagger protruded between his shoulder blades.

‘There was a note pinned to his back by the dagger,’ said Dogan, who had followed him in. ‘It’s addressed to you. Here it is.’ He handed Ezio a blood-stained sheet of parchment.

‘Have you read it?’

Dogan nodded.

‘When did this happen?’

‘Today. Can’t have been long ago because the flies haven’t really gathered yet.’

Ezio, caught between tears and rage, drew the dagger from Yusuf’s back. There was no fresh blood to flow.

‘You have earned your rest, brother,’ he said, softly. ‘*Requiescat in Pace*.’ Then he unfolded the sheet of parchment. Its message, from Ahmet, was short, but its contents made Ezio seethe with rage.

More Assassins had entered the courtyard now, and Ezio looked from one to the other.

‘Where is Sofia?’ he said, through his teeth.

‘We don’t know where he has taken her.’

‘Anyone else missing?’

‘We cannot find Azize.’

‘Brothers! Sisters! It seems as if Ahmet wishes the whole city to rise against us, while Yusuf’s murderer watches and waits in the Arsenal, laughing. Fight

with me, and let us show him what it means to cross the Assassins!’

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They made their way en masse to the Arsenal and there, in no mood to trifle, made short and brutal work of the Janissary guard loyal to Ahmet, who stood watch there. Ahmet could not have been expecting such a sudden surprise attack, or he had underestimated both the fury and the strength of the Assassins, whose power had grown steadily under Yusuf's command. Either that, or Ahmet believed he still held the trump cards for, when Ezio cornered him, he showed little sign of alarm.

Ezio, swept along by his rage, only managed to stop himself from killing the Ottoman prince at the very last moment, throwing him to the floor and gripping him by the throat, but then driving his hidden blade furiously into the tiles, inches from Ahmet's head. With Ahmet dead, he'd have no means of rescuing Sofia. That much had been clear from the note. But for an instant blood had clouded Ezio's judgment.

His face was close to the prince's. Ezio smelt the scent of violets on his breath. Ahmet returned his livid gaze calmly.

'Where is she?' Ezio demanded sternly.

Ahmet gave a light laugh. 'Such wrath!' he said.

'*Where – is – she*?!'

'My dear Ezio, if you think you are in a position to dictate terms, you may as well kill me now and be done with it.'

Ezio did not release his grip for a moment, nor did he retract the hidden blade, but seconds later reason got the better of him and he stood up, flexing his wrist so that the blade shot back into its harness.

Ahmet sat up, rubbing his neck, but otherwise remained where he was, still with a laugh in his voice. It was almost as if the prince were playing an enjoyable game, Ezio thought, with a mixture of frustration and contempt.

'I am sorry it had to come to this,' said Ahmet. 'Two men who should be friends, quarrelling over – what? The keys to some dusty old archive.' He got to his feet, dusting himself off, and continued, 'We both strive towards the same end, *Messer* Auditore. Only our methods differ. Do you not see that?' He paused. Ezio could guess what was coming next. He'd heard the Templars' rationale of

their dictatorial ambitions too often before. ‘Peace. Stability. A world where men live without fear. People desire the truth, yes, but even when they have it, they refuse to look. How do you fight this kind of ignorance?’

The prince’s voice had grown vehement. Ezio wondered if he actually believed what he was spouting. He countered, ‘Liberty can be messy, *principe*, but it is priceless.’ To himself, he thought: *tyranny is always better organized than freedom*.

‘Of course,’ Ahmet replied, drily. ‘And when things fall apart, and the lights of civilization dim, Ezio Auditore can stand above the darkness and say proudly, “I stayed true to my Creed.” ’ Ahmet turned away, bringing himself under control. ‘I will open Altaïr’s archive, I will penetrate his library, and I will find the Grand Temple. And, with the power that is hidden there, I will destroy the superstitions that keep men divided.’

‘Not in this life, Ahmet,’ Ezio replied, evenly.

Ahmet snorted impatiently and made to leave. Ezio didn’t attempt to stop him. At the door, the prince turned to him once more. ‘Bring the keys to the Galata Tower,’ he said. ‘Do this, and Sofia Sartor will be spared.’ He paused. ‘And do not delay, Ezio. My brother’s army will be here before too long. When it arrives, everything will change. And I need to be ready.’

With that, Ahmet left. Ezio watched him go, signalling to his men not to hinder him.

His thoughts were interrupted by a polite cough behind him. He turned – and saw Prince Suleiman standing before him.

‘How long have you been here?’ he demanded.

‘Long enough. Behind that arras. I heard your conversation. But then, I’ve had my dear uncle followed closely ever since he returned from his little trip abroad. In fact, I’ve been keeping an eye on him ever since he tried to have me killed – an attempt you so usefully foiled with your lute.’ He paused. ‘Nevertheless, I never expected to hear … all this.’

‘And what do you think?’

Suleiman pondered a moment before replying. Then he said, with a sigh, ‘He is a sincere man; but this Templar fantasy of his is dangerous. It flies in the face of reality.’ He paused. ‘Look, Ezio, I have not lived long, but I have lived long enough to know that the world is a tapestry of many colours and patterns. A just leader would celebrate this, not seek to unravel it.’

‘He fears the disorder that comes from differences.’

‘That is why we make laws to live by – a *kanun* that applies to all in equal measure.’

They were interrupted by the arrival of a patrol of Janissary guards which the Assassins outside had let pass, since this cohort was loyal to Suleiman. But when their lieutenant saw Ezio, he drew his scimitar.

‘Stand back, my *prens*!’ said the officer, making to arrest Ezio.

‘Hold, soldier,’ said Suleiman. ‘This man is not our enemy.’

The lieutenant wavered for a moment, then ordered his men out, muttering an apology.

Suleiman and Ezio smiled at one another.

‘We have come a long way since that first voyage,’ said Suleiman.

‘I was thinking what a challenge it would be to have a son like you.’

‘You are not dead yet, friend. Perhaps you will yet have a son worthy of you.’ Suleiman started to take his leave, when a thought struck him. ‘Ezio, I know you will be under extreme pressure, but – spare my uncle, if you can.’

‘Would your father?’

Suleiman did not hesitate. ‘I hadn’t thought about that – but, no.’

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Ezio made his way to the Istanbul Assassins' headquarters, at all possible speed. Once there, he took the four keys he'd already retrieved and added the one he'd taken from Manuel in Derinkuyu to their number. Packing them safely in a shoulder satchel, he slung it round him. He strapped his hookblade to his right wrist and his pistol to his left and, in case a quick escape from the top of the Tower should prove necessary, placed Leonardo's parachute in a backpack.

But before he went to the Tower, there was a quick duty he had to perform. He hastened to the Galata cemetery, where Yusuf's body had already been taken for burial.

Dogan had taken over as acting captain of the Istanbul Assassins, and he stepped forward to greet Ezio.

'Mentor.'

'Mentor,' said Irini, coming up in her turn to salute him.

Ezio addressed them briefly, standing by the coffin. 'Now should be a time for remembrance and mourning, I know. But our enemies do not permit us that luxury.' He turned to Dogan. 'I know that Yusuf thought highly of you, and I find no reason to question his judgment. Do you have it in your heart to lead these men and women, and to maintain the dignity of our Brotherhood, as Yusuf did with such passion?'

'It would be an honour,' Dogan replied.

'As it will continue to be an honour to work for our cause and to support the Creed,' said Evraniki, who stood beside him.

'*Bene*,' said Ezio. 'I am glad.' He stepped back and looked over the buildings which surrounded the cemetery, to where the Galata Tower stood. 'Our enemy is close,' he continued. 'When the obsequies are done, take up your positions around the Tower, and there await my command.'

He hurried away. The sooner Sofia was safe, the better.

He came upon Ahmet, flanked by a single guard, on a rampart near the Tower's foot.

'Where is she?' he demanded.

Ahmet smiled that irritating smile of his, and replied, ‘I admire you, Ezio, but your bloodlust makes it hard for me to call you a friend.’

‘Bloodlust? That is a strange insult coming from the man who ordered an attack on his own nephew.’

Ahmet lost some of his sangfroid. ‘He was to be kidnapped, Assassin, not killed.’

‘I see. Kidnapped by the Byzantines so that his uncle could rescue him and be heralded a hero. Was that the plan?’

Ahmet shrugged. ‘More or less.’

Then he nodded. At once half a dozen Templar soldiers appeared from nowhere and surrounded Ezio.

‘Now, *Messer* Auditore – the keys, if you please.’ He extended his hand.

But Ezio made a signal of his own. Behind the semicircle of Templars, a larger number of Assassins materialized, scimitars in their hands.

‘The girl first,’ said Ezio in a cold voice.

Ahmet chuckled. ‘She’s all yours.’

He made a gesture skywards. Ezio followed the direction of his arm and saw, atop the tower, a woman standing next to a guard, who was clearly poised to throw her over the edge. The woman was wearing a green dress, but her head was covered in a hessian sack. She was bound hand and foot.

‘Sofia!’ Ezio gasped involuntarily.

‘Tell your men to back off!’ snapped Ahmet.

Fuming, Ezio signalled the Assassins to do so. Then he threw Ahmet the satchel containing the keys. He caught it adroitly and checked its contents. Then he grinned. ‘As I said, she’s all yours!’

With that, he disappeared from the rampart, his men following. He boarded a waiting carriage, which sped off through the city, heading towards the North Gate.

Ezio had no time to watch him go. He took a running jump at the Tower, and began his ascent. Anxiety and anger speeded him, and in a matter of minutes he was on the topmost battlement at the side of the woman. The guard backed away towards the stairway which led downwards. Ezio leapt forward, wrenched the woman back from the edge of the Tower, and pulled the bag from her head.

It was Azize!

She’d been gagged to stop her crying out any warning. Ezio tore the scarf away from her mouth.

‘*Tesekkür, Mentor. Chok tesekkür ederim!*’ she gasped.

The guard cackled and rushed away down the stairs. He would meet a grim reception at the bottom.

Ezio was in the process of freeing Azize from her bonds when he was interrupted by a woman's scream. Turning to look, he saw, on another battlement, not far distant, a temporary gallows had been erected. On the scaffold, a rope already round her neck, stood Sofia, poised on a stool. As he watched, a Byzantine soldier reached up and tightened the noose with rough hands.

Ezio gauged the distance between the top of the Galata Tower and the battlement he had to reach. Leaving Azize to free herself from the rest of her bonds, he unslung his backpack and swiftly assembled the parachute. A matter of seconds later he was flying through the air, guiding the chute with his weight towards the scaffold where the Byzantines had kicked the stool from beneath Sofia's feet and tied off the rope. Still airborne, he unleashed his hookblade and used it to slice through the taut rope inches above Sofia's head. He landed an instant later and caught her falling body in his arms.

Uttering curses, the Byzantine guards made off. Assassins were racing through the streets between the Galata Tower and this battlement, but Ezio could see Byzantines coming towards them to block their approach. He would have to act alone.

But first he turned to Sofia, pulling the rope from her neck with frantic hands, feeling her breast rise and fall against his own.

'Are you hurt?' he asked, urgently.

She coughed and choked, getting her breath back. 'No, not hurt. But very confused.'

'I didn't mean to drag you into this. I am sorry.'

'You aren't responsible for other men's actions,' she said, hoarsely.

He gave her a moment to recover, and looked at her. That she could be so rational at a moment like this …! 'All this will be … behind us, soon. But first I must recover what they have taken. It is of prime importance!'

'I don't understand what's happening, Ezio. Who are these men?'

She was interrupted by a cannon's blast. Moments later, the battlement shook with the impact of a twenty-pound ball. Sofia was knocked to the ground as shattered stonework flew.

Ezio pulled her to her feet and scanned the area beneath them. His eye lit on an empty carriage guarded by two regular Ottoman troops, who had taken cover immediately the gunfire started.

He gauged the distance again. Would the parachute take both her weight and his? He'd have to risk it.

'Come!' he said, taking her in his arms tightly, and leaping from the battlement.

For a terrible moment it looked as if the parachute would snag on the crenellations, but it just cleared them and they dropped – very fast, but still slowly enough to make a safe landing near the carriage. Ezio folded the chute and stuffed it into his pack, not bothering to unclip it, and the two of them made a dash for the carriage. Ezio hurled Sofia onto the driver's seat, smacked one of the horse's flanks and leapt on after her. He seized the reins and drove away at breakneck speed, the Ottoman guards shouting vainly for him to stop as they pursued on foot.

Ezio drove hard, heading through the Galata district north, and out of the city.

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They were not far into the countryside when, as he'd hoped, Ezio saw Ahmet's carriage careering along the road ahead of them.

'Is that who you're after?' said Sofia, breathlessly.

Ezio crouched forward over the reins. 'That's him. We're gaining on them! Hang on!'

Ahmet had seen them too, and leaned out of his window, shouting, 'Well, well! You have come to see me off, have you?'

The two men posted on the back outer seat of his carriage had turned round, trying to steady themselves as they aimed crossbows at Ezio and Sofia.

'Take them down!' ordered Ahmet. 'NOW!'

But Ezio urged his horses forward and soon drew abreast of Ahmed's carriage. In response, Ahmet's coachman swerved so that he crashed into his pursuer. Neither vehicle capsized, but Ezio and Sofia were flung brutally sideways. Sofia managed to hang onto the side of the seat, but Ezio was thrown clear, having only just time to seize a baggage-rope which was attached to the top of the carriage. He felt himself crash onto the roadway, then he was dragged along behind his own coach, now out of control, though Sofia had caught the reins and strove to pull the horses back from their frantic gallop.

This is becoming a habit, thought Ezio grimly and he tried to haul himself up the rope. But the carriage took a turn and he was thrown violently off the track, narrowly missing a gnarled tree by the wayside. He retained his grip, however, but realized he could get no further up the rope at this speed. Gritting his teeth and holding on with one hand, he reached back with the other to his pack and pulled out the parachute. The force of the air driving past them blew it open, and the clip which attached it to his pack held.

Ezio felt himself being lifted aloft, sailing behind the carriage, which had fallen back again to the rear of Ahmet's, which was accelerating away from them. But Ezio found it easier to manoeuvre himself down the rope now, even though it was a struggle against the power of the flying wind. At last, when he was close enough, he unleashed his hookblade and, reaching up behind him, cut the parachute free, landing with a crash in the seat next to Sofia.

‘Jesus really must smile on you,’ she said.

‘You’ve brought the horses under control – few people would have been able to do that,’ Ezio replied, catching his breath. ‘Perhaps he smiles on you, too.’ He noticed blood on her dress. ‘Are you hurt?’

‘A scratch. When I hit the side of the seat.’

‘Stay strong!’

‘I’m doing my best!’

‘Do you want me to take the reins?’

‘I daren’t let go of them!’

They were gaining on Ahmet again.

‘Your determination would be charming – if it were not also so infuriating!’ he yelled at them. Evidently he had lost none of his urbanity through the perils of the chase.

They were hammering towards a village where, as they could see, a platoon of Ottoman troops was stationed, guarding the road to the city. They had a barrier in place across the thoroughfare but its arm was raised.

‘Stop them!’ Ahmet roared as his carriage passed the bewildered soldiers ‘They are trying to assassinate your prince!’

The soldiers hurried to lower the barrier’s arm as Sofia charged towards them, smashing through the barrier and scattering soldiers like chickens in her wake.

‘Sorry!’ she cried, and then proceeded to knock down a whole row of market stalls which lined the main street.

‘Oh!’ she called. ‘Forgive me!’

‘Sofia, you must be careful,’ Ezio said.

‘I don’t want one single crack out of you about women drivers,’ she snapped, her teeth bared as their carriage clipped one of two poles supporting a banner across the street, bringing it down on the heads of the infuriated villagers storming in their wake.

‘What are you doing?’ said Ezio, his face white.

‘What do you think I’m doing? Keeping us on track!’

Meanwhile, Ahmet’s coachman had gained ground and the front coach was flying out of the village, as Ahmet urged his men on. Looking back, Ezio saw a cavalry patrol had set off in pursuit. The crossbowmen at the back of Ahmet’s carriage were bracing themselves to try to fire again, this time they succeeded in getting a couple of shots off. One bolt grazed Sofia’s shoulder.

‘*Aië*!’ she cried. ‘Ezio!’

‘Hang on!’ He ran his fingers over the slight wound, touching the soft skin. Despite all that was going on, he felt a tingle in his fingertips. A tingle he’d only

felt once before, during an experiment Leonardo had shown him, when his friend was tinkering about with something he'd called 'electricity'.

'It's a graze, nothing serious.'

'It's one graze too many! I could have been killed! What have you got me into?!'

'I can't explain now!'

'Typical! Any excuse!'

Ezio turned in his seat and scanned the cavalrymen riding behind. 'Get rid of them!' Sofia implored him.

He unleashed his pistol, checked it, and took careful aim at the front rider, bracing himself against the jolting and bucking carriage. Now or never! He took a deep breath, and fired.

The man flung up his arms as his horse swerved out of control across the path of his followers, and there was a mighty snarl-up as several horses crashed into one another, stumbling and falling and bringing their riders down, as those coming from behind were unable to veer and cannoned into the turmoil themselves. In the complete chaos of yelling men, whinnying horses and dust, the pursuit came to an abrupt halt.

'Glad you've made yourself useful at last!' said Sofia, as they sped away from the confusion behind them. But looking ahead, Ezio could see that the road now led through a very narrow gorge between two high cliffs, which reared on either side. Ahmet's carriage just passed between them. But their own vehicle was wider.

'Too narrow!' breathed Ezio.

'Brace yourself!' said Sofia, snapping the reins.

They flew into the gorge at top speed. The bare rock flashed past inches from Ezio's shoulder.

Then, they were out the other side.

'Eeah!' Ezio gasped.

Sofia flashed him a triumphant grin.

They had just come close enough to hear Ahmet cursing his crossbowmen, who had managed to reload and fire again but whose bolts flew well wide.

'Incompetent *children*!' he was hollering. 'What's the matter with you? Where did you learn to fight?'

After emerging from the gorge, the road wound to the west, and soon the glittering water of the Black Sea was in view to the north, on their right.

'Shape up or throw yourselves into the ocean!' Ahmet was bellowing.

'Oh no,' said Ezio, looking ahead.

‘What?’ asked Sofia. Then she saw what he’d seen, and in her turn, she said, ‘Oh, no.’

Another village. And, beyond it, another Ottoman guard post. Another pole across the road.

‘I must say you’ve got those horses under pretty good control,’ said Ezio, reloading his pistol with difficulty as the carriage bucked and jumped. ‘Most people would have lost them by now and they’d have bolted. Not bad at all – for a Venetian.’

‘You should see me handle a gondola,’ said Sofia.

‘Well, now’s the time to put them through their paces again,’ said Ezio.

‘Just watch me.’

It was market day here, too, but the crowd parted like the Red Sea did for Moses as the two carriages shot towards them.

‘Sorry!’ cried Sofia as a fish stall collapsed in her wake. Then it was the turn of a pottery stand. Shards flew everywhere and the air turned blue with the trader’s oaths and imprecations.

Next thing, a live chicken landed squawking in Ezio’s lap.

‘Did we just buy this?’ he asked.

‘It’s a drive through.’

‘What?’

‘Never mind.’

The chicken struggled out of Ezio’s grasp, pecking him for good measure, and half flew, half scrambled back to the relative safety of the ground.

‘Look out! Up ahead!’ Ezio shouted.

The guards had let Ahmet through, but they’d got their roadblock down behind him this time and stood ready, pikes held out towards Sofia’s horses. Unpleasant looks of anticipated triumph lit up their mean, swarthy faces.

‘It’s ridiculous,’ said Sofia.

‘What is?’

‘Well, look – they’ve got their roadblock in the middle of the road all right, but there’s nothing but bare ground either side of it. Do they take us for fools?’

‘Perhaps they are the fools,’ said Ezio, amused.

Then he had to grab hold of the seat fast as Sofia pulled hard on the left rein and dragged the horses in a tight turn, to gallop round the roadblock, leaving it to their right. Then she hauled hard right and regained the road thirty yards past the soldiers, some of whom hurled their pikes impotently after them.

‘See any cavalry?’ asked Sofia.

‘Not this time.’

‘Good.’ She snapped the reins, and once again they began to close the gap between themselves and Ahmet.

But there was yet another village, a small one, up ahead.

‘Not again!’ said Sofia.

‘I see it,’ said Ezio. ‘Try to close with him now!’

Sofia whipped up the horses but, as they reached the hamlet, Ahmet’s coachman craftily slowed. The soldiers on the back seat had replaced their crossbows with short-poled, vicious-looking halberds, whose axe heads gleamed in the sun. Despite her efforts to slow down too, Sofia couldn’t help drawing level, and Ahmet’s coachman managed to veer and clip them again. This time, he succeeded in throwing their carriage off balance and it began to topple. But the crash had had the same effect on Ahmet’s vehicle.

In the moment of collision, Ezio threw himself off his seat into the air, and landed on the roof of Ahmet’s coach. He whipped out the hookblade and swung it violently at the two soldiers to his left, slicing into each of them and bringing them down before they could bring their halberds into play. The coachman had spurred his horses on again in an effort to right his carriage, while Sofia’s had already capsized and crashed a short way behind them in a cloud of dust. They were at the side of a sharp drop and Ahmet’s wheels went over it, bringing his carriage down in turn.

Ezio, thrown clear, staggered to his feet and looked around, but the entire scene was obscured by choking dust. Confused cries came from somewhere – probably the local inhabitants, for as the dust began to clear, Ezio could see the coachman’s body lying prone among some rocks.

There was no sign of Ahmet.

Or Sofia.

Vainly, Ezio called her name.

72

When the dust had settled completely, Ezio was able to get his bearings. The startled villagers stood a little way off, eyeing each other uncertainly. Ezio's baleful glare was enough to keep them at bay, but he knew he'd have to work fast. It wouldn't be long before the Ottoman troops left in their wake would regroup and follow.

He surveyed the scene. Ahmet lay on his back some dozen feet from the wreck. He was groaning, clearly in great pain. The satchel containing the keys lay nearby. Then, to Ezio's intense relief, Sofia appeared from behind a patch of shrubbery. She was bruised and shaken, but otherwise unhurt. They exchanged a reassuring look, as Ahmet, with an effort, rolled himself onto his stomach and pushed himself up.

Ezio scooped up the satchel and opened it. The keys were undamaged. He looked at the fallen prince.

'So – what now, Ezio? How does this end?' Ahmet said, catching his breath in pain as he spoke.

Sofia came up behind Ezio, and put a hand on his shoulder.

'I am wondering that myself,' Ezio told Ahmet.

Ahmet began to laugh, and couldn't stop, even though it clearly hurt him to do so. He managed to struggle to his knees. 'Well, if you happen to find the answer …'

Out of nowhere, half a dozen Byzantine troops appeared. They were heavily armed and took up protective positions around the prince.

'… do let us know!'

Ezio grimaced, drawing his sword and signalling Sofia to step back.

'You are a fool, Ezio. Did you really think I'd travel without backup?'

Ahmet was about to laugh again but was cut off by a hail of arrows, seemingly coming from nowhere, which struck down all the Byzantines in a moment. One arrow struck Ahmet in the thigh and he fell back, howling in pain.

Ezio was equally taken aback. He knew no Assassins were in the vicinity, and there was no way that another Dilara could have arrived to rescue him.

He whipped round to see, a short distance away, a dozen Janissary cavalry, fitting fresh arrows to their bows. At their head was a regal-looking man of about forty-five, dressed in black and red, with a fur cape and luxuriant moustaches. He held up his hand.

‘Hold!’ he commanded.

The Janissaries lowered their bows.

The leader and two captains dismounted and made their way towards Ahmet, still writhing on the ground. They paid little heed to Ezio, who watched warily, unsure of his next move. He exchanged another glance with Sofia, who drew close to him again.

With a superhuman effort, Ahmet struggled to his feet, seizing a broken branch to support himself. He drew himself up, but at the same time gave ground to the new arrival.

Noticing the family resemblance between the two men, Ezio began to put two and two together. At the same time, Ahmet began to speak, addressing the Janissaries in a voice which he struggled to keep firm and commanding, ‘Soldiers! Selim is not your master! You serve the Sultan! You carry out his command alone! Where is he? Where is our Sultan?’

Ahmet had backed his way to a fence on the edge of the cliff overlooking the sea, and there, unable to go any further, he collapsed against it. The other man had followed and now stood over him.

‘Your Sultan stands before you brother,’ said the man. He put his hands on Ahmet’s shoulders and leant in close, speaking quietly. ‘Our father made his choice. Before he abdicated. It was the best thing.’

‘What are you going to do, Selim?’ Ahmet babbled, noticing the expression in his brother’s eyes.

‘I think it will be best to remove all possibility of further dissent, don’t you?’

Selim’s hands leapt to Ahmet’s throat, forcing him back against the fence.

‘Selim! Stop! Please!’ Ahmet cried. Then he started to choke.

Sultan Selim Osman was indifferent to his brother’s cries. In fact, they seemed to urge him on. Ezio saw that he was pressing down on Ahmet with far more force than was really necessary. Ahmet scrabbled at his brother’s face in a vain attempt to beat him off, and as he did so the fence, which had been buckling alarmingly under his weight, finally cracked and gave. Selim released his grip at the very moment that Ahmet, with a hollow scream of fear, fell backwards over the cliff and down to the black rocks 200 feet below.

Selim stood looking over the edge for a moment, his face impassive. Then he turned back, and walked over, at an easy pace, to where Ezio remained standing.

‘You must be the Assassin, Ezio Auditore.’

Ezio nodded.

‘I am Selim, Suleiman’s father. He speaks quite highly of you.’

‘He is a remarkable boy, *Ekselânslari*, with a magnificent mind.’

But Selim’s cordiality had come to an end. His affability had vanished as his eyes narrowed and his face grew dark. Ezio got a strong sense of the ruthlessness which had got this man to the position of power he now held. ‘Let us be clear,’ said Selim, his face close to Ezio’s. ‘Were it not for my son’s endorsement, I would have you killed where you stand. We do not need the influence of foreigners here. Leave this land and do not return.’

Unable to restrain himself, Ezio felt rage rise in him at this insult. He clenched his fists, something which did not go unnoticed by Selim, but in that moment Sofia saved his life by putting a restraining hand on his arm.

‘Ezio,’ she whispered, ‘let it go. This is not your fight.’

Selim looked him in the eye once more – challengingly. Then he turned and walked back to where his captains and his troop of cavalry were waiting for him.

Moments later they had mounted and ridden off in the direction of Constantinople. Ezio and Sofia were left with the dead, and with the gaggle of gawping locals.

‘No, it is not my fight,’ Ezio agreed. ‘But where does one end, and the next begin?’

73

A month later, and after the year had turned, Ezio stood once again at the foot of the great fortress of Masyaf.

Much had happened since he had last been there and, in the wake of Ottoman conquests in the region, the castle was now deserted. A solitary eagle flew overhead, but there was no sign of any human activity. The castle stood alone and silent, guarding its secrets. He started up the long, steep path that followed the escarpment which sloped up to the outer gates. After he had been walking for some time, he stopped and turned, concerned for his companion, who had fallen a little way behind, out of breath. He waited for her in the shade of an ancient, scarred tamarind.

'Such a climb!' panted Sofia, catching up.

Ezio smiled. 'Just imagine if you were a soldier burdened by a suit of armour and laden with supplies.'

'This is tiring enough. But it's more fun than sitting in a bookshop. I just hope Azize is managing OK back there.'

'Have no fear. Here.' He passed her his water canteen.

She drank, gratefully, then said, 'Has it been deserted long?'

'The Templars came and tried to break into its secret places, but they failed. Just as they failed – in the end – to secure the keys which, together, would have given them access. And now …'

They were silent for a moment as Sofia took in the grandeur of her surroundings. 'It is so beautiful here,' she said at last. 'And this is where your Brotherhood began?'

Ezio sighed. 'The Order began thousands of years ago but, here, it was reborn.'

'And its *levatrice* was the man you mentioned – Altaïr?'

Ezio nodded. 'Altaïr ibn-La'Ahad. He built us up, then set us free.' He paused. 'But he saw the folly of keeping a castle like this. It had become a symbol of arrogance and a beacon for all our enemies. In the end, he came to understand that the best way to serve justice was to live a just life. Not above the people we protect, but *with* them.'

Sofia nodded, then said, lightly, ‘And the mandate for the menacing hoods – was that Altaïr’s idea as well?’

Ezio laughed softly.

‘You mentioned a Creed, earlier,’ Sofia went on. ‘What is it?’

Ezio paused. ‘Altaïr made a great … study, throughout the latter years of his long life, of certain … codes, which were vouchsafed him. I remember one passage of his writings by heart. Shall I tell you?’

‘Please.’

‘Altaïr wrote: Over time, any sentence uttered long and loud enough, becomes fixed. Provided, of course, that you can outlast the dissent and silence your opponents. But should you succeed and remove all challengers, then what remains? Truth! Is it truth in some objective sense? No. But how does one ever achieve an objective point of view? The answer is that one doesn’t. It’s literally, physically impossible. Too many variables. Too many fields and formulae to consider. The Socratic method understood this. It provided for an asymptotic approach to truth. The line never meets the curve at any finite point. But the very definition of the asymptote implies an infinite struggle. We inch closer and closer to a revelation, but never reach it. Not ever … And so I have realized that as long as the Templars exist they will attempt to bend reality to their will. They recognize that there is no such thing as an absolute truth or if there is, we are hopelessly underequipped to recognize it. And so, in its place, they seek to create their own explanation. It is the guiding principle of what they call their New World Order: to reshape existence in their “own” image. It’s not about artefacts. It’s not about men. These are merely tools. It’s about concepts. Clever of them, for how does one wage war against a concept? It is the perfect weapon. It lacks a physical form, yet can alter the world around us in numerous, often violent ways. You cannot kill a Creed. Even if you kill all its adherents, destroy all its writings – that provides a reprieve at best. Some day, some day, we shall rediscover it. Reinvent it. I believe that even we, the Assassins, have simply rediscovered an Order that predates the Old Man of the Mountain … All knowledge is a chimera. It all comes back to time. Infinite. Unstoppable. It begs the question: what hope is there? My answer is this: we must reach a place where that question is no longer relevant. The struggle *itself* is asymptotic. Always approaching a resolution, but never reaching it. The best we can hope for is to smooth the line a bit. Bring about stability and peace, however temporary. And understand, Reader, it will always and forever be *only* temporary. For as long as we continue to reproduce, we will give rise to doubters and challengers. Men who will rise up against the status quo for no other reason, sometimes, than that they have nothing better to do. It is Man’s nature to disagree. War is but one of the many

ways in which we do so. I think many have yet to understand our Creed. But such is the process. To be mystified. To be frustrated. To be educated. To be enlightened. And then at last, to understand. To be at peace.'

Ezio fell silent. Then he said, 'Does that make sense?'

'*Grazie*. Yes, it does.' She gazed at him as he stood, lost in thought, his eyes on the fortress. 'Do you regret your decision? To live as an Assassin for so long?'

He sighed. 'I do not remember making any decision. This life – it chose me.'

'I see,' she replied, dropping her eyes to the ground.

'For three decades I have served the memory of my father and my brothers, and fought for those who have suffered the pain of injustice. I do not regret those years, but now …' He took a deep breath, as if some force greater than himself had released him from its grip, and he moved his gaze from the castle to the eagle, still soaring, soaring. 'Now it is time to live for myself, and let them go. To let go of all of this.'

She took his hand. 'Then let go, Ezio. Let go. You will not fall far.'

74

It was late in the afternoon when they arrived at the outer bailey gate. It stood open, and already climbing plants were weaving their way around its pillars. The winch mechanisms above were festooned with creepers. They crossed to the inner bailey and here, too, the gates were open, and within, the courtyard showed signs of a hasty departure. A half-laden, abandoned supply wagon stood near a huge, dead plane tree under which a broken stone bench rested.

Ezio led the way into the Keep and then down a staircase into the bowels of the castle, carrying a torch to light them as they went down a series of dismal corridors, until, at last, they stood before a massive stone door made of some smooth green stone. Its surface was broken by five slots, arranged in a semicircle at shoulder height.

Ezio put down his pack and from it produced the five keys.

He weighed the first one in his hand. ‘The end of the road,’ he said, as much to himself as to Sofia.

‘Not quite,’ said Sofia. ‘First, we have to discover how to open the door.’

Ezio studied the keys and the slots into which they must fit. Symbols surrounding the slots gave him his first clue.

‘They must – somehow – match the symbols on the keys,’ he said, thoughtfully. ‘I know that Altaïr would have taken every precaution to safeguard this archive – there must be a sequence. If I fail to get that right, I fear the door may remain locked forever.’

‘What do you hope to find behind it?’ Sofia sounded breathless, almost awed.

Ezio’s own voice had sunk to a whisper, though there was no one but her to hear him. ‘Knowledge, above all else. Altaïr was a profound man and a prolific writer. He built this place as a repository for all his wisdom.’ He looked at her. ‘I know that he saw many things in his life, and learned many secrets, both troubling and deep. He acquired such knowledge as would drive lesser men to despair.’

‘Then is it wise to tap into it?’

‘I am worried, it is true. But then,’ he cracked a smile, ‘I am not, as you should know by now, a lesser man.’

‘Ezio – always the joker.’ Sofia smiled back, relieved that the tension had been broken.

He placed the torch he held in a sconce, where it gave them both enough illumination to read by. He noticed that the symbols on the door had begun to glow with an indefinable light, scarcely perceptible but clear, and that the keys themselves glowed, seemingly in response. ‘Have a careful look at the symbols on these keys with me. Try to describe them out loud as I look at the symbols on the door.’

She put on her glasses and took the first of the keys he gave her. As she spoke, he studied the markings on the door closely.

Then he gave a gasp of recognition. ‘Of course. Altaïr spent much time in the east, and gained much wisdom there.’ He paused. ‘The Chaldeans!’

‘You mean – this might have something to do with the stars?’

‘Yes – the constellations. Altaïr travelled in Mesopotamia, where the Chaldeans lived.’

‘Yes, but they lived two thousand years ago. We have books – Herodotus, Diodoros Siculus – that tell us they were great astronomers, but no detailed knowledge of their work.’

‘Altaïr had – and he has passed it on here, encoded. We must apply our weak knowledge of the stars to theirs.’

‘That is impossible! We all know that they managed to calculate the length of a solar year to within four minutes, and that’s pretty accurate, but how they did it is another matter.’

‘They cared about the constellations and the movement of the heavenly bodies through the sky. They thought, by them, they could predict the future. They built great observatories—’

‘That is pure hearsay!’

‘It’s all we have to go on, and look – look here. Don’t you recognize that?’

She looked at a symbol engraved on one of the keys.

‘He’s made it deliberately obscure – but isn’t that’ – Ezio pointed – ‘the constellation of Leo?’

She peered at what he had shown her. ‘I believe it is!’ she said, looking up, excited.

‘And here’ – Ezio turned to the door and looked at the markings near the slot he had just been examining – ‘here, if I am not mistaken, is a diagram of the constellation of Cancer.’

‘But that is the constellation next to Leo, isn’t it? And isn’t it also the sign which precedes Leo in the Zodiac?’

‘Which was invented by—’

‘The Chaldeans!’

‘Let’s see if this theory holds water,’ said Ezio, looking at the next slot. ‘Here is Aquarius.’

‘How apt,’ Sofia joked, but she looked seriously at the keys. At last she held one up. ‘Aquarius is flanked by Pisces and Capricorn,’ she said, ‘but the one that comes after Aquarius is Pisces. And here – I think – it is!’

‘Let’s see if the others work out in a similar way.’

They worked busily and found after only a matter of ten minutes more that their supposition seemed to work. Each key bore the symbol of a constellation corresponding to a sign of the Zodiac, and each key-sign corresponded to a slot identified with a constellation immediately preceding it in the Zodiac cycle.

‘Quite a man, your Altaïr,’ said Sofia.

‘We’re not there yet,’ Ezio replied. But, carefully, he put the first key into what he hoped was its corresponding slot – and it fitted.

As did the other four.

And then – it was almost an anticlimax – slowly, smoothly and soundlessly the green door slid down into the stone floor.

Ezio stood in the entrance. A long hallway yawned before him and, as he looked, two torches within simultaneously and spontaneously flared into life.

He took one from its sconce and stepped forward. Then he hesitated, and turned back to Sofia.

‘You had better come back out of there alive,’ she said.

Ezio gave her a mischievous smile and squeezed her hand tightly. ‘I plan to,’ he said.

He made his way forward.

As he did so, the door to the vault slid closed again, so fast that Sofia hardly had time to react.

75

Ezio walked slowly down the hallway, which sloped ever downwards and broadened out as he progressed. He scarcely had need of his torch, since the walls were lined with them, and they flared alight by some mysterious process as he passed them. But he had no sense of unease or trepidation. In a curious way he felt as if he were coming home. As if something were nearing its completion.

At length the hallway debouched into a vast, round chamber, 150 feet across and 150 feet high to the top of its dome, like the circular nave of some wondrous basilica. In the body of the room there were cases which must once have contained artefacts, but were empty now. The multiple galleries which ran round it were lined with bookshelf upon bookshelf – every inch of every wall was covered with them.

Ezio noticed, to his astonishment, that every single one of them was empty.

But he had no time to ponder this, as his eye was drawn irresistibly to a huge oak desk on a high podium at the far end of the room, opposite the entrance. It was brightly lit from somewhere far above and the light fell squarely on the tall figure seated at the desk.

Now Ezio did feel something like awe, for in his heart he knew immediately who this was. He approached with reverence, and when he drew near enough to touch the cowled figure in the chair, he fell to his knees.

The figure was dead – he had been dead a long time. But the cloak and white robes were undamaged by the passage of centuries, and even in his stillness the dead man radiated – something. Some kind of power – but no earthly power. Ezio, having made his obeisance, rose again. He did not dare lift the cowl to see the face, but he looked at the long bones of the skeletal hands stretched out on the surface of the desk, as if drawn to them. There was a pen and blank sheets of ancient parchment on the table and a dried-up inkwell. Under the figure's right hand lay a circular stone – not unlike the keys of the door, but more delicately wrought, and made, as Ezio thought, of the finest alabaster he had ever seen.

'No books,' said Ezio into the silence. 'No artefacts … Just you, *fratello mio*.' He laid a hand delicately on the dead man's shoulder. They were in no way

related by blood, but the ties of the Brotherhood bound them more strongly than those of family ever could.

‘ *Requiescat in Pace*, O Altaïr.’

He looked down, thinking he had caught a movement out of the corner of his eye. But there was nothing except that the stone on the desk was free of the hand which Ezio must have imagined had covered it. A trick of the light. No more.

Ezio knew instinctively what he had to do. He struck a flint to light a candle stump in a stick on the desk and studied the stone more closely. He put his own hand out and picked it up.

The moment he had it in his hand, the stone began to glow.

He raised it to his face as familiar clouds swirled, engulfing him …

76

‘You say Baghdad has been sacked?’

‘Yes, Father. Khan Hulagu’s Mongols have driven through the city like a conflagration. No one has been spared. He set up a wagon wheel and made the population file past it. Anyone whose head came higher than the wheel’s hub, he killed.’

‘Leaving only the young and malleable?’

‘Indeed.’

‘Hulagu is not a fool.’

‘He has destroyed the city. Burned all its libraries. Smashed the university. Killed all its intellectuals along with the rest. The city has never seen such a holocaust.’

‘And never will again, I pray.’

‘Amen to that, Father.’

‘I commend you, Darim. It is well you took the decision to sail to Alexandria. Have you seen to my books?’

‘Yes, Father – those we did not send with the Polo brothers, I have already sent to Latakia on wagons for embarkation.’

Altaïr sat hunched by the open doorway of his great, domed library and archive. Empty now, swept clean. He clutched a small wooden box. Darim had more sense than to ask his father what it was.

‘Good. Very good,’ said Altaïr.

‘But there is one thing – one fundamental thing – that I do not understand,’ said Darim. ‘Why did you build such a vast library and archive over so many decades if you did not intend to keep your books?’

Altaïr waved an interrupting hand. ‘Darim, you know very well that I have long outlived my time. I must soon leave on a journey that requires no baggage at all. But you have answered your own question. What Hulagu did in Baghdad, he will do here. We drove them off once, but they will return and when they do Masyaf must be empty.’

Darim noticed that his father hugged the small box even more tightly to his chest as he spoke, as if protecting it. He looked at Altaïr, so fragile as to seem

made of parchment but inside, tough as vellum.

‘I see,’ he said. ‘This is no longer a library then – but a vault.’

His father nodded gravely.

‘It must stay hidden, Darim. Far from eager hands. At least until it has passed on the secret it contains.’

‘What secret?’

Altaïr smiled, and rose. ‘Never mind. Go, my son. Go and be with your family, and live well.’

Darim embraced him. ‘All that is good in me, began with you,’ he said.

They drew apart. Then, Altaïr stepped through the doorway. Once within, he braced himself, straining to pull a large lever just inside, up by the lintel. At last it moved, and, having completed its arc, clicked into place. Slowly, a heavy green stone door rose from the floor to close the opening.

Father and son watched each other wordlessly as the door came up. Darim tried hard to keep his self-control, but finally could not restrain his tears as the door imprisoned his father in his living grave. At last he found himself looking at what was to all intents and purposes a blank surface, only the slight change of colour distinguishing door from walls, that and the curious grooves cut into it.

Beating his breast in grief, Darim turned and left.

Who were the ones who came before? thought Altaïr, as he made his way unhurriedly down the long hallway that led to his great domed underground chamber. As he passed them, the torches on the walls lit his way, fuelled by a combustible air which led to them from hidden pipes within the walls, ignited by sprung flints which operated as his weight triggered catches under the floor. They flared for minutes behind him, then went out again.

What brought them here? What drove them out? And what of their artefacts? What we have called Pieces of Eden. Messages in bottles. Tools left behind to aid and guide us. Or do we fight for control over their refuse, giving divine purpose and meaning to little more than discarded toys?

He shuffled on down the hall, clutching the box, his legs and arms aching with weariness.

At last he gained the great gloomy room, and crossed it without ceremony. He reached his desk with the relief that a drowning man feels when he finds a spar to cling to in the sea.

He sat down, placing the box carefully by him, well within reach, hardly liking to take his hands from it. He pulled paper, pen and ink towards him, dipped the pen, but did not write. He thought instead of what he *had* written – something from his journal.

> The Apple is more than a catalogue of that which preceded us. Within its twisting, sparking interior I have caught glimpses of what will be. Such a thing should not be possible. Perhaps it isn't. Maybe it is simply a suggestion. I contemplate the consequences of these visions: are they images of things to come – or simply the potential for what might be? Can we influence the outcome? Dare we try? And, in so doing, do we merely ensure that which we've seen? I am torn – as always – between action and inaction – unclear as to which – if either – will make a difference. Am I even meant to make a difference? Still, I keep this journal. Is that not an attempt to change – or guarantee – what I have seen?
>
> How naïve to believe that there might be a single answer to every question. Every mystery. That there exists a lone, divine light which rules over everything. They say it is a light that brings truth and love. I say it is a light that blinds us – and forces us to stumble about in ignorance. I long for the day when men will turn away from invisible monsters, and once more embrace a more rational view of the world. But these new religions are so convenient – and promise such terrible punishment should one reject them – I worry that fear shall keep us stuck to what is truly the greatest lie ever told …

The old man sat for a while in silence, not knowing whether he felt hope or despair. Perhaps he felt neither. Perhaps he had outgrown or outlived both. The silence of the great hall and its gloom protected him like a mother's arms. But still he could not shut out his past.

He pushed his writing materials from him, and drew the box towards him, placing both hands on it, guarding it – from what?

Then it seemed that Al Mualim stood before him. His old Mentor. His old betrayer. Whom he had at last exposed and destroyed. But when the man spoke, it was with menace and authority,

'In much wisdom is much grief. And he that increaseth knowledge, increaseth sorrow.' The ghost leant forward, speaking now in an urgent whisper, close to Altaïr's ear. 'Destroy it! Destroy it as you said you would!'

'I – I can't!'

Then another voice. One which caught at his heart as he turned to it. Al Mualim had disappeared. But where was *she*? He couldn't *see* her!

'You tread a thin line, Altaïr,' said Maria Thorpe. The voice was young, firm. As it had been when he'd met her, seven decades ago.

'I have been ruled by curiosity, Maria. As terrible as this artefact is, it contains wonders. I would like to understand as best I can.'

'What does it tell you? What do you see?'

'Strange visions and messages. Of ones who came before, of their rise, and their fall …'

'And what of us? Where do we stand?'

'We are links in a chain, Maria.'

'But what happens to us, Altaïr? To our family? What does the Apple say?'

Altaïr replied, 'Who were the ones that came before? What brought them here? How long ago?' But he was talking more to himself than to Maria, who

broke in on his thoughts again, ‘Get rid of that thing!’

‘This is my duty, Maria,’ Altaïr told his wife, sadly.

Then she screamed, terribly. And the rattle in her throat followed, as she died.

‘Strength, Altaïr.’ A whisper.

‘Maria! Where … where are you?’ To the great hall he cried, ‘Where is she?!’ But the only answer was his echo.

Then a third voice, itself distressed, though trying to calm him.

‘Father – she is gone. Don’t you remember? She is gone,’ Darim said.

A despairing howl, ‘Where is my *wife*?’

‘It has been twenty-five years, you old fool! She’s *dead*!’ his son shouted at him angrily.

‘Leave me. Leave me to my work!’

Softer, now: ‘Father – what is this place? What is it for?’

‘It is a library. And an archive. To keep safe all that I have learned. All that they have shown me.’

‘What have they shown you, Father?’ A pause. ‘What happened at Alamut before the Mongols came? What did you find?’

And then there was silence, and the silence covered Altaïr like a warm sky, and into it he said, ‘Their purpose is known to me now. Their secrets are mine. Their motives are clear. But this message is not for me. It is for another.’

He looked at the box on the desk before him. *I shall not touch that wretched thing again. Soon I shall pass from this world. It is my time. All the hours of the day are now coloured by the thoughts and fears born of this realization. All the revelations that were ever to be vouchsafed me are done. There is no next world. Nor a return to this one. It will simply be – done. Forever.*

And he opened the box. In it, on a bed of brown velvet, lay the Apple. A Piece of Eden.

I have let it be known that this Apple was first hidden in Cyprus and then lost at sea, dropped in the ocean … this Apple must not be discovered until it is time …

He gazed at it for a moment then rose and turned to a dark recess in the wall behind him. He pressed a lever which opened a heavy door, covering a hidden alcove, in which stood a pedestal. Altaïr took the Apple from the box, a thing no bigger than a kickball, and transferred it quickly to the pedestal. He worked fast, before temptation could work on him, and pulled the lever again. The door over the alcove slid shut, snapping into place with finality. Altaïr knew that the lever would not operate again for two and a half centuries. Time for the world to move on, perhaps. For him, though, temptation was over.

He took his seat at his desk again, and took from a drawer a white alabaster disc. He lit a candle by him and took the disc in both hands, raising it in front of his eyes, closing them and concentrating, he began to imbue the alabaster with his thoughts – his testament.

The stone glowed, lighting up his face for a long time. Then the glow faded, and it grew dark. All grew dark.

Ezio turned the disc over and over in his hands under the candlelight. How he had come to learn what he now knew, he had no idea. But he felt a deep fellowship, a kinship, even, with the husk that sat at his side.

He looked at Altaïr, incredulous. ‘Another artefact?’ he said. ‘Another *Apple*?’

77

He knew what to do and did it almost as if he were still in a dream. He placed the disc carefully back on the desktop, and turned to the dark recess behind it. He knew where to look for the lever, and it gave immediately when he tugged at it gently. As the door slid open, he gasped. *I thought there was only one. The one Machiavelli and I buried forever in the vault under the church of San Nicola in Carcere. And now – its twin!*

He studied the Apple for a moment. It was dark and cold – lifeless. But he could feel his hand, as if independent of his will, reaching out for it.

With a supreme effort, he stopped himself.

'NO! You will stay HERE!'

He took a step back.

'I have seen enough for one lifetime!'

He put his hand on the lever.

But then the Apple flared into life, its light blinding him. He staggered back, turning to see in the centre of the now dazzlingly lit chamber the world – the world! – turning in space, twenty feet above the floor, a giant vulgar ball of blue, brown, white and green.

'NO!' he yelled, hiding his eyes with his hands. 'I have done enough! I have lived my life as best I could, not knowing its purpose, but drawn forward like a moth to a distant moon. No more!'

Listen. You are a conduit for a message which is not for you to understand.

Ezio had no idea where the voice was coming from or whose it was. He took his hands from his eyes and placed them over his ears, turning to the wall, his body wrenched to and fro as if he were being beaten. He was pulled round to face the room. Swimming in the air, filling the gaudy brightness, were trillions of numbers and icons, calculations and formulae and words and letters, some jumbled, some thrown together to make occasional sense, but splitting again to give way to chaos. And from their midst the voice of an old man; old because from time to time it trembled. It was not without authority. It was the most powerful voice Ezio had ever heard.

Do you hear me, cipher? Can you hear me?

And then – something like a man, walking towards him as if from a great distance, walking through the swirling sea of all the symbols man had ever used to try to make sense of it all – walking on air, on water, but not on land. Ezio knew that the figure would never break free to reach him. They were on two sides of an unbridgeable abyss.

Ah. There you are.

The numbers around the figure shifted and pulsed and started to flee from one another without being able to get free – in a kind of nightmarish entropy. But the figure became clearer. A man. Taller and broader than most men. Ezio was reminded of one of the statues of Greek gods Michelangelo had shown him when the Borgias' collection had been seized by Pope Julius. An old god though. Zeus or Poseidon. A full beard. Eyes which shone with an unearthly wisdom. Around him, the trailing digits and equations ceased to battle with one another and finally began to drift away, faster and faster, until they were gone, and the world was gone, and all that was left was this – man. What else was Ezio to call him?

Tinia. Tinia is my name. I think you've met my sisters.

Ezio looked at the creature but it was watching the very last trailing formulae as they scurried away through the ether.

The voice when it next spoke seemed oddly human, a little unsure of itself.

A strange place, this nexus of Time. I am not used to the … calculations. That has always been Menrva's domain.

He looked at Ezio quizzically. But there was something else – profound sadness, and a kind of paternal pride.

I see you still have many questions. Who were we? What became of us? What do we desire of you? Tinia smiled. *You will have your answers. Only listen and I will tell you.*

Light slowly drained from the entire room now, and once again a ghostly blue revolving globe came into view directly behind Tinia, and slowly grew in size until it occupied almost the entire chamber.

Both before the end and after, we sought to save the world.

Small dots began appearing on the huge revolving globe, one after another.

These mark where we built vaults in which to work, each dedicated to a different manner of salvation.

Ezio saw one of the dots among the many flash brightly. It was near the eastern seaboard of a vast continent he couldn't imagine really existed, except that he knew that his friend Amerigo Vespucci had discovered a coastline there a decade earlier, and he had seen the Waldseemüller map depicting all the

discovered world. But all this map showed was further south. Could there be more? A great land there? It seemed so unlikely.

They were placed underground to avoid the war which raged above, and also as a precaution should we fail in our efforts.

And Ezio saw now that beams of light were beginning to stretch like lines across the slowing spinning globe from all the other points marked on it to the one on the strange new continent, and went on until the entire world was crisscrossed with a filigree of lines of light.

Each vault's knowledge was transmitted to a single place …

And now Ezio's point of view changed as he watched the great image of the world; he seemed to plummet towards it, down through space, until it seemed as if he were about to crash into the ground which rose to meet him. But then – then it was as if he were lifted up at the last moment and was skimming along close to the ground, then down again, down through a shaft like a mineshaft until he emerged in an immense underground building, like a temple or a palace hall.

It was our duty … mine, and my sisters, Menrva and Uni – to sort and sample all that was collected. We chose those solutions which held the most promise, and devoted ourselves to testing their merits. And indeed, now Ezio was in the great hall, in the mysterious vault in the mysterious land – or seemed to be there – and there, near Tinia, stood Menrva and Uni, whom Ezio had indeed encountered before …

Six we tried in succession, each one more encouraging than the last. But none worked.

And then – the world ended.

The last statement was made in so simple and matter of fact a tone that Ezio was taken aback by it. He saw Menrva, heavy-hearted, and Uni, angry – look on as Tinia put into action a complex mechanism which triggered the great doors of the place to close, and seal themselves shut. And then …

Then, a great wave of indescribable power hit the upper vault of heaven, and lit up the sky like ten thousand northern lights. Ezio seemed to be standing amidst hundreds of thousands of people, in an elegant city, all looking up at the supernatural display above them. But the light breeze which played on them changed from zephyr to storm and then to hurricane within less than a minute. The people looked at one another in disbelief then panic, and scurried away to safety.

The sky, still ablaze with waves of green fire, now began to crackle and spark with lightning. Thunder rolled and crashed, though there was not a cloud to be seen, and bolts smashed from the heavens onto trees, buildings and people alike. Debris flew through the air, destroying everything in its path.

Next, a colossal tremor caused the ground to shudder. Those left in the open lost their footing and were struck down by rocks and stones, carried like balls of paper by the wind, before they could rise. The earth shook again, more violently this time, and the screams and cries of the afflicted were drowned by the crack of lightning and the deafening scream of the gale. Survivors in the open strove to find shelter, some fighting to keep their balance by clinging to the sides of whatever buildings still stood, as they clawed their way along.

But, amidst the general devastation, great temples stood firm, untouched by the catastrophe around them, bearing tribute to the technical ingenuity of those who had built them. But another great tremor rippled the ground, and then another. A broad highway split in two along its length, and people fled from the growing abyss which cleaved it. The sky by now was on fire, arcs of lightning rushing from one horizon to the other, and the upper reaches of the firmament seemed about to implode.

Then it appeared to Ezio that he saw the earth from afar again, engulfed in a gargantuan solar flare, trapped in a web of gigantic fireballs, and then, unthinkably, the world shifted from its axis, rolling over … The elegant city, the refined, sophisticated collection of tall buildings and manicured parks, was riven with gaping wounds as the earth split and cracked under it, ripping down previously untouched edifices and smashing them to pieces. The few people in the remains of the streets screamed, one last despairing cry of agony as the shift in the earth's poles left the planet's surface vulnerable to the deadly radiation of solar flares. The last structures were swept away like houses of cards in the wind.

And then – just as suddenly as it had started – all became quiet. The northern lights ceased just as a candle's flame dies when a man blows it out and, almost immediately, the wind calmed. But the devastation was complete. Almost nothing had been spared. Fires and smoke, darkness and decay, held illimitable dominion over all.

Through the miasma, Tinia's voice came to Ezio. Or to someone like him. Nothing was certain any more.

Listen. You must go there. To the place where we laboured … Laboured and lost. Take my words. Pass them from your head into your hands. It is how you will open the Way. But be warned. Much still remains in flux. And I do not know how things will end – either in my time, or yours.

The dust storms were clearing, the molten lava was cooling. Time accelerated as tiny shoots broke through the ground and re-established themselves. The entrance to an underground vault opened, and people of the First Civilization emerged, and they, in turn, began to rebuild. But their numbers were few and did

not increase. Over many centuries they diminished, until there were only a few hundred left, then a few dozen, then none …

What they had rebuilt was claimed by the conquering forests. Their new buildings disappeared in their turn, devoured by time. A low-hilled, richly forested landscape enveloped those great expanses not covered by plains. And then, people – but different from the First Comers. Humans now. Those whom the First Comers had created as slaves would now, free, become their heirs. Some indeed had been taken as lovers by the First Comers and from them a small line of people with more than human powers had emerged. But the true inheritors were the humans. The first in this unknown land were men and women with deeply tanned skins and long straight black hair. Proud peoples who hunted strange, dark brown, wild cattle, riding bareback on tough ponies, using bows and arrows. People who lived in separate tribes and fought one another but with little bloodshed.

Then more people came. Paler people, whose clothes were different and covered them more fully. People who came on ships from Europe, across the Mare Occidentalis. People who hunted down the others and drove them from their lands, establishing in turn their own farms, villages and, again at last, towns and cities to rival those of the lost civilization, which had disappeared into the earth many millennia before.

Mark this and remember. It is never your choice to give up the fight for justice. Even when it seems that it can never be won, that all hope is lost, the fight, the fight *ensures the survival of justice, the survival of the world. You live balanced on the edge of a cliff, you cannot help that. Your job is to ensure that the balance never tips too far to the wrong side. And there is one more thing you can do which will make certain that it never does: you can love.*

Ezio clung to the desk. Next to him, Altaïr still sat in his chair. Nothing had moved on the desktop, not a sheet of parchment had stirred, and the stump of candle burned with a steady light.

He did not know how he had got from the recess to the desk, but now he retraced the few steps. The Apple still rested on its pedestal within the alcove, cold and dead. He could hardly make out its contours in the gloom. Its dust-covered box, he noticed, lay on the desktop.

He gathered himself together, and crossed the great chamber again, making for the corridor which would lead back to the sunlight, and to Sofia.

But at the entrance to the great library, he turned once more. Far away now, as it seemed, he looked for one last time at Altaïr, sitting for eternity in the ghost of his library.

‘Farewell, Mentor,’ he said.

78

Reaching the outer doorway, Ezio found the lever by the lintel and pulled it. Obediently, the green door slid down into the ground. And there was Sofia, reading a book, waiting for him.

She smiled as he emerged, and stood, and came to him and took his hand.

‘You came back,’ she said, unable to disguise the sheer relief in her voice.

‘I promised I would.’

‘Have you found what you sought?’

‘I have found – enough.’

She hesitated. ‘I thought …’

‘What?’

‘I thought I’d never see you again.’

‘Sometimes our worst premonitions are the least reliable.’

She looked at him. ‘I must be mad. I think I like you even when you’re being pompous.’ She paused. ‘What do we do now?’

Ezio smiled. ‘We go home,’ he said.

Part Three

O Light Eternal, in yourself abiding,
Known to yourself, and by yourself, alone –
Thus, you can love, and smile upon yourself:
Your knowledge self-sufficient, and within.

– Dante, *Paradiso*

79

Ezio was quiet for much of the journey back to Constantinople. Sofia, remembering Selim's dire warning, questioned the wisdom of his returning there at all, but he merely said, 'There is still work to be done.'

She wondered about him – he seemed so withdrawn, almost ill. But when the golden domes and white minarets once again appeared on the northern seaboard, his spirits lifted, and she saw the old gleam back in his dark grey eyes.

They returned to her shop. It was almost unrecognizable. Azize had modernized it and all the books were ranged neatly on their shelves in impeccable order. Azize was almost apologetic when she handed Sofia back the keys, but Sofia had mostly noticed that the shop was full of customers.

'Dogan wishes to see you, Mentor,' Azize said, as she greeted Ezio. 'And be reassured. Prince Suleiman knows of your return, and has provided you with a safe-conduct. But his father is adamant that you should not remain long.'

Ezio and Sofia exchanged a look. They had been together a long time now, six months at least, ever since she had insisted on accompanying him on his journey to Masyaf – a request which he'd agreed to, to her surprise, with no objection at all. Indeed, he had seemed to welcome it.

With Dogan, Ezio made sure that the Turkish Assassins had a firm base in the city with Suleiman's tacit agreement and under his unofficial protection. The work had already started of purging the city and the empire of any last trace of renegade Ottomans and Byzantines, who were now leaderless, following the deaths of Ahmet and Manuel, and the Janissaries, under Selim's iron hand, knew no more dissent within their ranks. There was no need of any, since their preferred prince had made himself their king.

As for the Templars, their power bases in Italy and now in the east broken, they had disappeared. But Ezio knew that this volcano was dormant, not extinct. His troubled thoughts turned to the Far East – the Orient – and he wondered what the knowledge imparted to him by Tinia and the ghostly globe might mean for the undiscovered continents – if they existed – far away across the Western Sea.

Dogan, though lacking Yusuf's élan, made up for this by his organizational skills and his complete devotion to the Creed. He might make a Mentor one day, Ezio thought. But his own feelings seemed to have been cut adrift. He no longer knew what he believed, if he believed in anything at all, and this, with one other thing, was what had preoccupied him during the long voyage home.

Home! What could he call home? Rome? Florence? His work? But he had no real home, and he knew in his heart that his experience in Altaïr's hidden chamber at Masyaf had marked the end of a page in his life. He had done what he could, and he had achieved peace and stability – for the time being – in Italy and in the east. Could he not now afford to spend a little time on himself? His days were growing short, he knew, but there were still enough of them left to reap a harvest. If he dared take the risk.

Ezio spent his fifty-third birthday, Midsummer's Day, 1512, with Sofia. The days permitted him by Selim's visa were growing short in number. His mood seemed sombre. They were both apprehensive, as if some great weight were hanging over them. In his honour she had prepared a completely Florentine banquet: *salsicce di cinghiale* and *fettunta*, then *carciofini sott'olio*, followed by *spaghetti allo scoglio* and *bistecca alla fiorentina*; and afterwards a good dry *pecorino*. The cake she made was a *castagnaccio*, and she threw in some *brutti ma buoni* for good measure. But the wine, she decided, should come from the Veneto.

It was all far too rich, and she'd made far too much, and he did his best, but she could see that food, even food from home, which had cost her a fortune to get, was the last thing on his mind.

'What will you do?' she asked him.

He sighed. 'Go back to Rome. My work here is done.' He paused. 'And you?'

'Stay here, I suppose. Go on as I have always done. Though Azize is a better bookseller than I ever was.'

'Maybe you should try something new.'

'I don't know if I'd dare to, on my own. This is what I know. Though—' she broke off.

'Though what?'

She looked at him. 'These last few months – almost a year now – I have learned that there is a life outside books.'

'All life is outside books.'

'Spoken like a true scholar!'

'Life enters books. It isn't the other way round.'

Sofia studied him. She wondered how much longer he'd hesitate. Whether he'd ever come to the point at all. Whether he'd dare. Whether he even wanted to – though she tried to keep that thought at bay – and whether she'd dare prompt him. That trip to Adrianopolis without him had been the first time she'd realized what was happening to her, and she was pretty sure it had happened to him as well. They were lovers – of course they were lovers. But what she really longed for hadn't happened yet.

They sat at her table for a long time in silence. A very charged silence.

'Azize, unlike you, has not sprung back from her ordeal at Ahmet's hands,' said Ezio, finally, and slowly, pouring them both fresh glasses of Soave. 'She has asked me to ask you if she may work here.'

'And what is your interest in that?'

'This place would make an excellent intelligence centre for the Seljuk Assassins.' He corrected himself hastily. 'As a secondary function, of course, and it would give Azize a quieter role in the Order. That is, if you …'

'And what will become of me?'

He swallowed hard. 'I – I wondered if …'

He went down on one knee.

Her heart was going like mad.

80

They decided it would be best to marry in Venice. Sofia's uncle was vicar-general of Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari in the San Polo district, and had offered to officiate. As soon as he realized that Ezio's late father had been the eminent banker Giovanni Auditore, he had given the marriage his whole-hearted blessing. Ezio's connection with Pietro Bembo didn't do any harm either, and though Lucrezia Borgia's former lover couldn't attend, being away in Urbino, the guests did include Doge Leonardo Loredan and the up-and-coming young painter Tizian Vecelli, who, smitten by Sofia's beauty, and jealous of Dürer's picture of her, offered, for a friendly price, to do a double portrait of them as a wedding tribute.

The Assassin Brotherhood had paid Sofia a generous price for her bookshop. Under it, in the cistern Ezio had discovered, the five keys of Masyaf were walled up and sealed. Azize, though sad to see them go, was also overjoyed at her new profession.

They stayed several months in Venice, allowing Sofia to acquaint herself with her scarcely known homeland, and to make friends with her surviving relatives. But towards New Year, Ezio began to grow restless. There had been impatient letters from Claudia in Rome. Pope Julius II, long the Assassins' protector, was approaching his sixty-ninth birthday, and ailing. The succession was still in doubt, and the Brotherhood needed Ezio there to take charge of things in the interim period that would follow Julius' death.

But Ezio, though worried, still put off making any arrangements for their departure.

'I no longer wish to be part of these things,' he told Sofia in answer to her enquiry. 'I need to have time to think for myself, at last.'

'And to think of yourself, perhaps.'

'Perhaps that too.'

'But still, you have a duty.'

'I know.'

There were other things on his mind. The leader of the North European branch of the Brotherhood, Desiderius Erasmus, had written to Claudia from Queens'

College, Cambridge, where the wandering scholar was for the present living and teaching. He wrote that there was a newly appointed Doctor in Bible at Wittenberg, a young man called Luther, whose religious thinking might need watching, as it seemed to be leading to something very revolutionary indeed – something which might yet again threaten the fragile stability of Europe.

He told Sofia of his concern.

'What is Erasmus doing?'

'He watches. He waits.'

'Will you recruit new men to the Order if there is a shift away from the Roman Church in the north?'

Ezio spread his hands. 'I will be advised by Desiderius.' He shook his head. 'Everywhere, always, there is fresh dissent and division.'

'Isn't that a feature of life?'

He smiled. 'Perhaps. And perhaps it is not my fight any more.'

'That doesn't sound like you.' She paused. 'One day, you will tell me what really happened in that vault under Masyaf.'

'One day.'

'Why not tell me now?'

He looked at her. 'I will tell you this. I have come to realize that the progress of mankind towards the goals of peace and unity will always be a journey – there will never be an arrival. It's just like the journey through life of any man or woman. The end is always the interruption of that journey. There is no conclusion. There is always unfinished business.' Ezio was holding a book in his hands as he spoke – Petrarch's *Canzoniere*. 'It's like this,' he continued, 'death doesn't wait for you to finish a book.'

'Then read what you can, while you can.'

With a new determination, Ezio made arrangements for the journey back to Rome.

By that time, Sofia was pregnant.

81

‘What took you so long?’ Claudia snapped, then pulled him to her and kissed him hard on both cheeks. ‘*Fratello mio*. You’ve put on weight. All that Venetian food. Not good for you.’

They were in the Assassins’ Headquarters on Tiber Island. It was late in February. Ezio’s arrival back in Rome had coincided with the funeral of Pope Julius.

‘Some good news, I think,’ Claudia went on. ‘Giovanni di Lorenzo de’ Medici is going to be elected.’

‘But he’s only a deacon.’

‘Since when has that stopped anyone from becoming Pope?’

‘Well, it would be good news, if he gets it.’

‘He has the backing of almost the entire College of Cardinals. He’s even chosen a name – Leo.’

‘Will he remember me?’

‘He could hardly forget that day back in the *duomo* in Florence when you saved his father’s life. And his own, by the way.’

‘Ah,’ said Ezio, remembering. ‘The Pazzi. It seems like a long time ago.’

‘It is a long time ago. But little Giovanni is all grown up now – he’s thirty-eight, would you believe? And a tough customer.’

‘As long as he remembers his friends.’

‘He’s strong. That’s what counts. And he wants us on his side.’

‘If he is just, we will stand by him.’

‘We need him as much as he needs us.’

‘That is true.’ Ezio paused, looking round the old hall. So many memories. But it was almost as if they had nothing to do with him now. ‘There is something I need to discuss with you, sister.’

‘Yes?’

‘The question of … my successor.’

‘As Mentor? You are giving up?’ She did not sound surprised.

‘I have told you the story of Masyaf. I have done all I can.’

‘Marriage has softened you up.’

‘It didn’t soften you up, and you’ve done it twice.’

‘I do approve of your wife, by the way. Even if she is a Venetian.’

‘*Grazie*.’

‘When’s the happy event?’

‘May.’

She sighed. ‘It’s true. This job wears one out. The Blessed Mother knows, I’ve only been doing it in your stead for two short years, but I have come to realize what you have been carrying on your shoulders for so long. Have you thought of who might take on the mantle?’

‘Yes.’

‘Machiavelli?’

Ezio shook his head. ‘He would never accept. He is far too much of a thinker to be a leader. But the job – and I say this in all modesty – needs a strong mind. There is one of our number, never called on to assist us before in anything but his diplomatic missions, whom I have sounded out and who, I think, is ready.’

‘And do you think the others – Niccolò himself, Bartolomeo, Rosa, Paola and Il Volpe – will elect him?’

‘I think so.’

‘Who have you in mind?’

‘Lodovico Ariosto.’

‘*Him?*’

‘He was Ferraran ambassador to the Vatican twice.’

‘And Julius nearly had him killed.’

‘That wasn’t his fault. Julius was in conflict with Duke Alfonso at the time.’

Claudia looked astonished. ‘Ezio – have you taken leave of your senses? Do you not remember who Alfonso is married to?’

‘Lucrezia – yes.’

‘Lucrezia *Borgia*.’

‘She’s leading a quiet life these days.’

‘Tell Alfonso that! Besides, Ariosto’s a sick man – and, by Saint Sebastian, he’s a weekend poet! I hear he’s working on some tosh about *Sieur* Roland.’

‘Dante was a poet. Being a poet doesn’t automatically emasculate you, Claudia. And Lodovico is only thirty-eight, he’s got all the right contacts, and, above all, he’s loyal to the Creed.’

Claudia looked sullen. ‘You might as well have asked Castiglione,’ she muttered. ‘He’s a weekend *actor*.’

‘My decision is taken,’ Ezio told her, firmly. ‘But we will leave it to the Assassin Council to ratify it.’

She was silent a long time, then smiled, and said, ‘It’s true that you need a rest, Ezio. Perhaps we all do. But what are your plans?’

‘I’m not sure. I think I’d like to show Sofia Florence.’

Claudia looked sad. ‘There’s not much left of the Auditores there to show her. Annetta’s dead, did you know?’

‘Annetta? When?’

‘Two years ago. I thought I wrote to you about it.’

‘No.’

They both fell silent, thinking of their old housekeeper, who had stayed loyal and helped save them after their family and their home were destroyed by Templar agents over thirty years earlier.

‘Nevertheless, I’m taking her there.’

‘And what will you do there? Will you stay?’

‘Sister, I really don’t know. But I thought … If I can find the right place …’

‘What?’

‘I might grow a little wine.’

‘You don’t know the first thing about it!’

‘I can learn.’

‘You – in a vineyard! Cutting bunches of grapes!’

‘At least I know how to use a blade.’

She looked scornful. ‘Brunello di Auditore, I suppose! And what else? Between harvests, I mean.’

‘I thought – I might try my hand at a bit of writing.’

Claudia almost exploded.

82

Claudia would later come to love her visits to the estate in the hills above Florence which Ezio and Sofia found more or less falling down, but bought and, with the proceeds from the sale of the Constantinople bookshop to the Assassins and Ezio's own capital, restored. They turned the place into a modest, but quite profitable vineyard within two years.

Ezio became lean and tanned, wore workmen's clothes during the day. Sofia scolded him, telling him that his hands were getting too gnarled from working on the vines for lovemaking. But that hadn't prevented them from producing Flavia in May, 1513, and Marcello a year later, in October.

Claudia loved her new niece and nephew almost more than she thought possible. She made quite sure however, given the twenty-year difference in their ages, that she didn't become a kind of ersatz mother-in-law to Sofia. She never interfered, and she disciplined herself to visit the Auditore estate near Fiesole no more than half the number of times she would have liked to. Besides, she had a new husband in Rome to think about.

But Claudia couldn't love them as much as Ezio did. In them, and in Sofia, Ezio had at last found the *reason*, which he had spent a lifetime seeking.

83

Machiavelli had had a hard time of it politically, and even spent a while in prison, but when the white water was past and he was able to take up the reins of his life in Florence again, he was a frequent visitor to the Villa Auditore. Ezio missed him when he wasn't there, though he didn't take kindly to his old friend's sometimes acerbic comments on his frequently put-off attempts to write a memoir. The *raccolto* of 1518 had not been good, and Ezio had caught some kind of chest infection – which he ignored – that had dragged on throughout the winter.

Early one evening, near the beginning of the following spring, Ezio sat alone by the fire in his dining hall, a glass of his own red by him. He had pen and paper, and was trying to make a start, for the umpteenth time, on Chapter XVI, but he found recollection far less interesting than action, and after a while, as always, he pushed the manuscript impatiently away. Reaching for his glass, he was overcome by a fit of painful coughing, and knocked it over. It fell with a terrible clatter, spilling wine all over the olive-wood surface of his table, but it did not break. He stood to retrieve it as it rolled towards the edge of the table, and righted it. Sofia came in, attracted by the noise.

'Are you all right, *amore*?'

'It's nothing. I'm sorry about the mess. Hand me a cloth.'

'Forget the cloth. You need rest.'

Ezio groped for a chair as Sofia stood by his side, easing him down. 'Sit,' she commanded, gently. As he did so, she picked up the unlabelled bottle, a small towel was wrapped round its neck, and checked the level of wine left in it.

'Best cure for a cold,' said Ezio, sheepishly. 'Has Niccolò arrived yet?'

'He is right behind me,' she replied, adding drily, 'I'd better bring you another bottle. This one, I see, is nearly empty.'

'A writer needs his fuel.'

Machiavelli had entered the room with the lack of ceremony he was entitled to as an old friend and a frequent guest. He took the cloth from Sofia.

'Here, let me.' He wiped the glass, and then the table top. Ezio watched him, a slightly sour look on his face.

‘I invited you here to drink, not clean up after me.’

Machiavelli finished the job before he replied, with a smile, ‘I can do both. A tidy room and a good glass of wine are all a man needs to feel content.’

Ezio laughed mockingly. ‘Rubbish! You sound like a character from one of your plays.’

‘You’ve never seen one of his plays,’ put in Sofia, shaking her head.

Ezio was embarrassed. ‘Well, I can imagine.’

‘Can you? Then why not put that imagination to work? Why don’t you buckle down and get on with this?’ Machiavelli indicated the neglected manuscript.

‘We’ve been over this, Niccolò. I don’t write. I’m a father, a husband, a winemaker. I’m quite happy with that.’

‘Fair enough.’

Sofia had fetched a fresh bottle of the red, and placed it, with two clean glasses, clean napkins, and a basket of *pandiramerino* by them. ‘I’ll leave you two to discuss literature together,’ she said. ‘Once I’ve helped Andrea get the children to bed, I’ve got some writing of my own to do.’

‘What’s that?’ asked Machiavelli.

‘Never you mind,’ she said. ‘I’ll just wait to see what you think of the wine. He’s been fretting about it. Through several bottles.’

‘She’ll have finished well before you even get started,’ said Machiavelli.

‘Never mind that,’ said Ezio. ‘Taste this. Last year’s harvest. A disaster.’

‘If you ask for my judgment, you shall have it.’

He sipped the wine Ezio had poured him, rolled it round his mouth, savouring it, and swallowed.

‘It’s delicious,’ he smiled. ‘Sangiovese again – or have you changed?’

Sofia’s face broke into a grin, as she rubbed Ezio’s shoulder. ‘You see?’ she said.

‘A blend,’ said Ezio, pleased. ‘But mainly my old Sangiovese. I didn’t really think it was all that bad. My grapes are the best.’

‘Of course they are.’ Machiavelli took another deep draught. Ezio smiled, though Sofia noticed that his hand went to his chest surreptitiously, to massage it.

‘Come on,’ said Ezio. ‘There’s still some light in the sky. I’ll show you …’

They went outside and walked down the avenue which led to the vineyards.

‘Trebbiano for the white,’ Ezio said, waving his hand at a row of vines. ‘You must have some with dinner. We’re getting *tonno al cartoccio*. Serena’s speciality.’

‘I love the way she cooks tuna,’ Machiavelli replied. He looked around. ‘You’ve done well, Ezio. Leonardo would have been proud to see what you have

cultivated here.'

'Only because I'm using the tools he gave me,' Ezio said, laughing. 'He'd be jealous. I sell twice as much wine as he ever does from his vineyards in Porta Vercinella. Still, he should never have sent that rascal Salai back from Amboise to run the place.' Then he paused. 'What do you mean – he *would have been* proud?'

Machiavelli's face grew grave. 'I've had a letter. It's to both of us actually, but it takes forever for the post to get out here to Fiesole. Look, Ezio, he's not too well. He'd like to see us.'

Ezio squared his shoulders. 'When do we start?' he said.

They reached the Clos Lucé, the manor house near the chateau at Amboise which King Francis had given Leonardo as part of the package of his patronage, in late April. The Loire flowed at an easy pace, the banks of its brown waters crowded with trees in new leaf.

They rode through the gates of the manor, down an avenue lined with cypress trees, to be met by a manservant. Leaving their horses in the care of an ostler, they followed the manservant into the house. In a large, airy room, its open windows overlooking the park to the rear, lay Leonardo on a chaise-longue, dressed in a yellow brocade gown, and half covered by a bearskin rug. His long white hair and beard were straggly, and he had gone bald on top, but his eyes still shone brightly, and he half rose to greet them.

'My dear friends – I am so glad you have come! Etienne! Bring us wine and cakes.'

'You're not supposed to have cakes. Let alone wine.'

'Look here – who pays your wages? Never mind – don't answer that. The same man that pays mine, I know! Just do as you're told!'

The manservant bowed, and left soon to return with a tray which he placed ceremoniously on a nearby polished table, before taking his leave again. But as he did so, he bowed once more, and said to Leonardo's guests, 'You must forgive the disorder. It's our way.'

Machiavelli and Ezio shared a smile. The polished table and the gleaming tray were an island in a rough sea of chaos. Leonardo's habits hadn't changed.

'How are things, old friend?' asked Ezio, taking a seat near the artist.

'I can't complain, but I'm interested in moving on,' Leonardo said, trying to make his voice sound stronger than it was.

'What do you mean?' said Ezio, concerned that his friend was using some kind of euphemism.

‘I’m not talking about dying,’ said Leonardo, irritably. ‘I’m talking about England. Their new king’s very interested in building up his navy. I’d like to get over there and sell him my submarine. The Venetians never did pay me, you know.’

‘They never built it.’

‘That’s beside the point!’

‘Don’t you have enough to occupy your mind here?’ asked Machiavelli.

Leonardo gave him an outraged look. ‘If you can call creating a mechanical lion occupying my mind!’ he snapped. ‘That was my liege lord’s last commission. I ask you – a mechanical lion that walks along and roars, and as a finale his breast opens and reveals a basket of lilies!’ He snorted. ‘Good enough in itself, I suppose, but to demand such a gewgaw of me! Me!! The inventor of flying machines, and tanks!’

‘And parachutes,’ added Ezio, softly.

‘Did it come in handy?’

‘Very handy.’

‘Good.’ Leonardo waved a hand towards the tray. ‘Help yourselves. But not me.’ His voice fell a little. ‘Etienne’s right – the most I can stomach these days is warm milk.’

They were silent. Then Machiavelli said, ‘Do you paint still?’

Leonardo grew sad. ‘I’d like to … But somehow I’ve lost the force. Can’t seem to finish things any more. But I’ve left Salai the *Gioconda* in my will. It might help him out in his old age. I think Francis would love to buy it. Mind you, I wouldn’t give you tuppence for it myself. Not my best work, not by far. I prefer the thing I did of dear little Salai as John the Baptist …’ His voice trailed off, and he looked into the middle distance, at nothing. ‘That dear boy. Such a pity I had to let him go. I miss him so much. But he was wretched here. He’s better off looking after the vineyards.’

‘I tend vines myself, these days,’ said Ezio, softly.

‘I know! Good for you. Much more sensible for a man of your age than running around hacking the heads off Templars.’ Leonardo paused. ‘I’m afraid they will always be with us, whatever we do. Perhaps it’s better to bow to the inevitable.’

‘Never say that!’ cried Ezio.

‘Sometimes we have no choice,’ Leonardo replied sadly.

There was silence again, then Machiavelli said, ‘What’s this talk of wills, Leonardo?’

Leonardo looked at him. ‘Oh, Niccolò, what’s the point of pretence? I’m dying. That’s why I asked you to come. We three have been through so much. I

wanted to say goodbye.'

'I thought you had plans to visit King Henry of England?'

'He's a bullish young puppy, and I'd like to,' Leonardo replied. 'But I won't. I can't. This room is the last place I'll ever see. And the trees outside. Full of birds, you know, especially now it's spring again.' He lay silent for so long, without moving, that the two friends looked at each other in alarm. But then Leonardo stirred. 'Did I nod off?' he asked. 'I shouldn't. I don't have time for sleep. Be getting enough of that, soon enough.'

Then he was silent again. He was asleep once more.

'We'll come back tomorrow,' Ezio said gently. He and Machiavelli rose, and made for the door.

'Come back tomorrow!' Leonardo's voice stopped them in their tracks. 'We'll talk some more.'

They turned to him as he raised himself on one elbow. The bearskin fell from his knees and Machiavelli stooped to replace it.

'Thank you, Niccolò.' Leonardo looked at them. 'I'll tell you a secret. All my life – while I thought I was learning to live, I have simply been learning how to die.'

They were with him a week later, when he breathed his last, in the small hours of 2 May. But he no longer knew them. He was already gone.

'A rumour's already going around,' said Machiavelli as they rode sadly homeward, 'that King Francis cradled his head in his arms as he died.'

Ezio spat. 'Some people – even kings – will do anything for publicity,' he said.

84

The seasons revolved four more times. Little Flavia had turned ten; Marcello was approaching his ninth birthday. Ezio could not believe that he had reached the age of sixty-four. Time seemed to speed up more relentlessly, the less you had left of it, he thought. But he tended his vines and enjoyed it, and still, as Machiavelli and Sofia endlessly pressed him to, continued with his memoir. He had reached Chapter XXIV already!

He still trained, too, despite the nagging cough which had never quite left him. But he had long since handed his Assassin's weapons over to Ariosto. There was no news from Rome or Constantinople, or indeed from Erasmus in Rotterdam, to give him any cause for anxiety, though the predicted split in the Church had occurred, with young Luther at the forefront of the reformation in the north. New wars threatened the world once again. Ezio could only watch and wait. Old habits died hard, he thought. And he'd become enough of a countryman to be able to catch the scent of a storm.

It was afternoon, and he looked from his veranda across his vineyards to the south, where he could see three figures on a carriage, silhouetted on the skyline. He did not recognize them and it was too far away to see what manner of people they were, though he saw that their unfamiliar headgear marked them as foreigners. But they did not stop. He guessed they hoped to make Florence by dusk.

He went back into the villa and made for his room. His den. He had the shutters drawn there to help him concentrate. An oil lamp was burning on a desk scattered with papers. His day's literary efforts. He seated himself reluctantly, put on his glasses, and read what he had written, grimacing slightly. The battle with the Wolfmen! How could he have failed to make *that* interesting?

He was interrupted by a knock at the door.

'Yes?' he said, not displeased to be interrupted.

The door opened halfway and Sofia stood there, though she did not enter.

'I'm taking Marcello into town,' she said cheerily.

'What – to see Niccolò's latest?' said Ezio, looking up from his reading and not really paying attention to her. 'I shouldn't have though *Mandragola* was a

suitable play for an eight-year-old.'

'Ezio, Machiavelli's play closed three weeks ago. Besides, I'm not going to Florence just to Fiesole.'

'I missed his play? He'll be furious.'

'I'm sure he'll be fine about it. He knows you've got your head down. We'll be back soon. Keep an eye on Flavia, will you? She's playing in the garden.'

'Of course. I'm fed up with this anyway. I think I'll do some pruning instead.'

'I must say it's a pity to waste such a glorious afternoon cooped up in here.' She gave him a slight look of concern. 'Some fresh air would do you good.'

'I'm not an invalid!'

'Of course you aren't, *amore*. I was just thinking …' She gestured towards the crumpled pages scattered over the desk. Ezio pointedly dipped his quill and drew a blank sheet towards him.

'*A presto!* Be safe.'

Sofia closed the door softly. Ezio wrote a few words and then stopped, scowling at the page.

He put down his quill, took off his glasses, and crumpled the page into a ball. Then he stalked from the room. He *did* need some fresh air.

He went to his tool shed and collected a pair of secateurs and a trug. Then he made his way across the garden towards the nearest row of vines. He looked idly around for Flavia but he could see no sign of her. He wasn't unduly worried. She was a sensible girl.

He was halfway to the vineyard when he heard a sudden noise from a nearby shrubbery: Flavia in peals of laughter. She had ambushed him!

'Flavia, *tesoro* – stay where I can see you!'

There was more laughter as the bush shook. Then Flavia peeked out. Ezio smiled, shaking his head.

Just then his attention was caught by someone on the road. He looked up, and, in the far distance, he saw a figure dressed in oddly coloured, motley garb. But the sun was behind it, and too bright for him to make it out completely. He held his hand up to shield his eyes, but when he looked again, the figure had disappeared.

He wiped his brow, and made his way across to his vines.

A little later he was deep in the vineyard, pruning the Trebbiano grapes. They didn't really need it, but it gave him something to do while his mind beavered away at the problem of recounting the story of his fight, long ago in Rome, with the group of fanatics who'd called themselves the Sons of Remus. The vines brushed his elbows as he worked. He stopped to examine a bunch of grapes, he

plucked one from the cluster and examined it, rolling it around. He squeezed it, crushing it and saw that it was juicy. He smiled, and ate the mangled grape, cleaning his fingers on his coarse linen tunic.

He wiped his brow again, satisfied. A breeze blew up, making the vine leaves rustle. He took a deep breath, scenting the warm air, and closed his eyes for a moment.

Then he felt the hairs on the back of his neck prickle.

He opened his eyes and made his way fast to the edge of the vines, looking in the direction of the villa. There, on the road by it, he saw Flavia talking to the oddly clothed person he'd seen earlier. The figure wore a peaked hood.

He hurried towards them, his secateurs held like a dagger. The wind freshened, bearing his warning cries away. He broke into a jog, wheezing with the effort. His chest hurt. But he had no time to worry about that. The figure was bending down towards his daughter.

'Leave her alone!' he shouted, stumbling on.

The figure heard him, turning its head, but keeping it lowered. At the same moment, Flavia plucked something, which she'd evidently been offered, from its hand.

Ezio was nearly upon them. The figure drew itself erect, head still low. Ezio hurled his secateurs at it, as if they were a throwing-knife, but they fell short and clattered harmlessly to the ground.

Ezio drew up to them. 'Flavia! Go inside!' he commanded, keeping the fear out of his voice.

Flavia looked at him in surprise. 'But, Pappa – she's nice.'

Ezio stepped between his daughter and the stranger, and took the person by the coat lapels. The stranger's head came up, and Ezio saw the face of a young Chinese woman. He released her, taken aback.

The child held up a small oval coin with a square hole at its centre for him to see. The writing on it – if it was writing – looked strange. Pictograms. A Chinese *qián*.

The Chinese woman remained motionless, silent. Ezio, still tense, looked at her closely. He was breathing heavily, winded, but his mind was razor-sharp.

Then he saw that at her neck she wore a familiar emblem.

The emblem of the Brotherhood of the Assassins.

85

Later, when Sofia had returned, the three of them sat talking in the villa, while the children watched curiously from the top of the staircase. Ezio was being as hospitable as he possibly could to his unexpected guest, but he was adamant.

‘I don’t know what else to say, Shao Jun. I am so sorry.’

The Chinese woman did not reply, she was not angry, only very calm.

‘I am very sorry. But I cannot help you. I don’t want any part of this.’

Shao Jun raised her eyes to meet his. ‘I want to understand.’

‘Understand what?’

‘How to lead. How to rebuild my Order.’

He sighed, now slightly annoyed. ‘No. For me, that is over. *Finito*.’ He paused. ‘Now, I think you should go.’

‘Ezio, think!’ Sofia scolded him. ‘Shao Jun has come a long way.’ She turned to their guest. ‘Did I pronounce your name correctly?’

Jun nodded.

‘Will you stay for dinner?’

Ezio gave his wife a black look, and turned to face the fireplace.

‘*Grah-zie*,’ said Jun, in hesitant Italian.

Sofia smiled. ‘Good. And we have a bedroom already made up. You are welcome to stay for a few nights – or as long as you like.’

Ezio growled, but said nothing. Sofia left in the direction of the kitchens, while Ezio slowly turned and observed his guest. Shao Jun sat quietly; she was completely self-possessed. She surveyed the room.

‘I’ll be back before dark,’ he told her, in a bad-tempered voice.

He stormed out, throwing his manners to the wind. Jun watched him go, a subtle smile on her lips.

Once outside, Ezio took refuge in his vineyard.

86

Ezio was in the children's room, watching their sleeping figures by candlelight. He stepped up to the window and locked it. He sat on the edge of Flavia's bed, looking at her and Marcello with a heavy heart. They looked so peaceful – so angelic.

Suddenly the room got a little brighter as Sofia entered, holding another candle. He looked up at her and smiled. She smiled back, and sat at the foot of Marcello's bed.

Ezio said nothing for a moment.

'Are you all right?' she asked, a little timidly.

He looked down at his children again, lost in thought. 'I can't seem to leave my past behind me,' he muttered. Then he turned his gaze to his wife. 'I started this act of my life so late, Sofia. I knew I wouldn't have time to do everything … But now I worry that I won't have time to do *any*thing.'

Her eyes were sad, but full of understanding.

They heard a faint creaking from above, and looked towards the ceiling.

'What is she doing on the roof?' Ezio muttered.

'Leave her be,' said Sofia.

Above them, Shao Jun stood on the red tiles high up near the chimneys. She had taken up a pose which was something between an Assassin attack position and simply that of someone relaxing and enjoying themselves. She scanned the moonlit countryside as the night wind whispered around her.

The next day Ezio emerged from the villa early, to grey skies. He glanced up at the roof but, though the window of her room was open, there was no sign of Shao Jun.

He called her name, but there was no answer. He went to give orders to his foreman, for the time of the *vendange* was approaching, and he prayed for a good harvest this year – the grapes certainly promised it, and the summer weather had been favourable. The *veraison* had been good, too, but he wanted to double-check the sugar and acid levels in the grapes before picking. Then he'd

send the foreman into Fiesole and as far as Florence if need be, to recruit the seasonal labour. It was going to be a busy time, and it was one which Ezio looked forward to every year – lots of physical activity and little time to think about anything else. Shao Jun's arrival had thrown the hard won security he now enjoyed off track. He resented it. He found himself hoping that she had left before dawn.

Once he had finished his meeting with his foreman, he felt an irresistible impulse to return to the villa to see if his prayer had been answered. Somehow he doubted it, but there was no one about when he entered the house. Grimly, following some instinct which hollowed his stomach, he made his way to his den.

He stopped short at the door. It was open. He swept into the room and discovered the Chinese woman standing behind his desk – still littered with discarded notes and pages from the days before – reading part of the completed manuscript.

Ezio fell into a red rage. 'What do you think you're doing? Get out!'

She put down the sheaf of papers she was reading from, and looked at him calmly. 'The wind – it opened the door.'

'*Fuori!!* '

Jun walked past him and out of the room. He made his way quickly to the desk and shuffled the papers around, picking up one that caught his eye and reading it. Then, unimpressed, he tossed it back on the pile, and turned from the desk to stare blankly out of the window. He could see Jun out there in the yard, her back to him, apparently waiting.

His shoulders slumped. After a few more minutes' hesitation, he left the den and made his way out to her.

She was sitting on a low stone wall. He approached her, coughing lightly in the keen October wind.

She turned. '*Duìbùqi* – I'm sorry. It was wrong of me.'

'It was.' He paused. 'I think you should leave.'

She sat silently for a moment, then, without warning, she quoted, ' "My name is Ezio Auditore. When I was a young man, I had liberty, but I did not see it; I had time, but I did not know it; and I had love, but I did not feel it. It would be thirty long years before I understood the meaning of all three." ' She paused. 'That is beautiful,' she said.

Ezio was stunned. He stared past Jun, reflecting. In the distance they could hear the jingling of a horse's reins.

'I want to understand, like you do,' Jun went on, 'how to help my people.'

Ezio looked at her with a friendlier eye. ‘I was an Assassin for a long time, Jun. And I know that at any moment, someone could come for me. Or my family.’ He paused. ‘Do you see? That is why I must be careful.’

She nodded, and he could see that she felt almost sorry for him. He looked towards his vineyards. ‘I should be starting to hire people to help me with the *vendange*, but …’

He trailed off. Jun tilted her head, listening.

‘Come inside. Let’s get something to eat.’

She slid off the wall and followed him.

87

The market in the great square south-west of the cathedral was as busy as ever. Merchants, businessmen, servants and peasants, jostled each other in a more or less friendly way as they passed between the stalls. Jun stood under one side of the surrounding colonnade, watching the bustle as Ezio, nearby, haggled in the cold sunlight with a stallholder over the price of a grape picker's basket. Jun was rapt, absorbing the sights and sounds of Florence. She stared openly at people just as openly as people stared at her. She was unbothered.

Ezio completed his purchase and came over, tapping her on the shoulder. 'I'll be lucky if this lasts three seasons,' he said. She looked at him as he showed her the basket, unsure what she should be looking for to judge its quality. Ezio realized this and smiled.

'Come on,' he said. 'I want to show you something.'

They moved through the crowds in the direction of the Piazza della Signoria, and once there sat down on a bench near the loggia, watching the people come and go, all brightly clad, except for those dressed in expensive black silks and velvets.

'Who are they?' asked Jun.

'They are the bankers,' Ezio replied. 'It's a kind of uniform, so that they can recognize each other – but it has another advantage – we can see them coming!'

Jun smiled uncertainly.

'It's nice, *no*?' Ezio continued. 'Full of life!'

'Yes.'

'But not always. Half my family was murdered in this piazza. Executed. Right here. Forty-five years ago. I was nineteen.' He closed his eyes briefly at the memory, then went on, 'But now to see it like this, so *piena di vita*, I can't help but feel content and satisfied that so much pain has faded away.' He looked at her earnestly. 'The life of an Assassin is pain, Jun. You suffer it and you inflict it. You watch it happen – all in the hope that you can help it disappear, in time. It's terribly ironic, I know. But there it is.'

They sat in silence for a while. Jun seemed watchful. Then Ezio saw her tense at something. Something she had noticed in the crowd. A flash of a certain

colour? A uniform perhaps? One of the Signoria guards? But the moment passed, and he let it go.

'All right,' he said, rising. 'Time to drag this old man back to his villa.'

They left, crossing the square and taking the street, so familiar to Ezio, which ran east, just to the north of the Palazzo. Jun kept casting backward glances.

The street they'd reached was considerably emptier of people, and finally, as they moved along it, they were alone. Suddenly, Ezio heard a noise which Jun did not. He turned his head quickly. He took a backward leap, raising his basket to shield Jun, and in the nick of time – a thrown dagger embedded itself in it. Barely a second later, someone landed Ezio a savage kick in the gut. He staggered backwards and fell against a stone wall. Meanwhile, Jun had reacted with lightning speed. She was already standing between Ezio and his assailant – another Chinese woman, similarly dressed to Jun, but stripped down to combat tunic and trousers.

The two women circled each other, almost balletically, slowly, then lunged at each other like striking snakes, landing slicing blows with the edges of their hands or kicking so fast that Ezio could barely follow the movement. But he could see that Jun was getting the worst of it. He sprang forward and struck her attacker on the head with the basket, sending her sprawling.

She lay prone, motionless. Jun stepped forward.

'Jun! She's faking it!'

At the same moment the mysterious woman was back on her feet, falling on Jun with another knife raised. They both fell to the ground, rolling in the dust, fighting with the ferocity and the vicious agility of cats, their limbs and bodies moving so fast that they became blurred. There was a sudden scream. The assailant broke free, her own knife buried in her chest, just above the sternum. She tottered sideways for a moment, then keeled over, striking her head on a flint buttress and was still. This time she was not faking.

Ezio looked round. No one in sight.

He grabbed Jun's hand.

'Come on!' he said, through clenched teeth.

As they rode home in Ezio's carriage, Jun began to explain. Ezio realized that she might have done so earlier if he'd given her the chance. He listened grimly as she told her tale.

'It was my Mentor's wish to meet you. We left China together, in secret. But we were followed. They caught up with us in Venice. They took my master prisoner there. He bade me flee, complete our mission. I did not see him again.'

'Who are they?'

‘Servants of Zhu Huocong – the Jiajing Emperor. A young man, scarcely more than a boy, and not born to rule, but fate gave him the throne and now he controls us with a ruthless and bloody hand.’ She paused. ‘I was born a concubine, but my Mentor freed me when I was young. We returned later to save more girls, but they were …’ She paused. ‘The emperor thought that if he drank their monthly blood it would give him eternal life.’ She broke off, swallowing hard before mustering her self-control with an effort and continuing, ‘Jiajing is a cruel man. He kills all who oppose him, and he prefers *ling chi* to beheading.’

‘*Ling chi*?’

Jun made several slicing motions across her palm. ‘Slow. process. Many thousand cuts. Then – dead.’

Ezio’s face set like granite. He whipped his horses on.

88

Sofia was in Ezio's den, stoking a fresh fire, when she heard the carriage tear up to the front of the house. Alarmed, she rose quickly to her feet. A moment later, Ezio burst in, closely followed by Shao Jun. He rushed to the window and closed the shutters, bolting them. Then he turned to his wife.

'Pack some bags. They are putting fresh horses to the coach. Some of our men will go with you.'

'What …?!'

'You must stay at Machiavelli's tonight.

'What's happened?'

'A misunderstanding.'

Sofia looked from him to Jun, who lowered her eyes, embarrassed at having brought her troubles to their door.

'Give me a moment,' she said.

Soon afterwards, she and the children were installed in the carriage. Ezio stood at its door. They looked at each other. Both wanted to say something, but no words came.

Ezio stepped back, and nodded to the coachman. He cracked the reins and the horses moved forward into the gathering gloom.

As they gathered pace, Sofia leaned from the window and blew him a kiss. He raised his arm in farewell then, without waiting to watch them out of sight, returned to the villa and closed and locked the door.

89

Ezio and Jun sat facing each other on wooden benches, drawn up in front of a roaring fire. Waiting.

‘When I first fought the Borgia, it was revenge that drove me, and my first impulse was to aim for the head,’ Ezio was telling her. ‘In time, however, I learned that those who inspire fear have more devoted followers than those who preach love. Killing Rodrigo and Cesare would have achieved nothing if I had not been able to replace their reign of terror with one that involved some measure of fraternity.’ He paused in thought. ‘So I spent many years teaching men and women to think and act for themselves. First in Rome, and then among our Brotherhood in Constantinople.’

‘I long to read of your deeds. You must finish your book.’

‘The important thing to realize is this: love binds our Order together; love of people, of cultures, of the world.’ He was silent again for a moment. ‘Fight to preserve that which inspires hope, and you will win back your people, Shao Jun.’

Jun stared into the flames, thinking, as the grand scope of her future widened in her imagination. ‘It will take a long, long time,’ she said quietly, at last.

‘But if you do it right, it will happen.’

Jun took a deep breath and straightened up, a determined expression on her face. She looked at Ezio and nodded. He leant across and patted her on the shoulder.

‘Get some rest,’ he said.

She rose, and bowed slightly, then left the room.

Ezio turned to the fire, its glow reddening his face.

Deep in the night, disturbed by stealthy sounds outside, Ezio made his way to the kitchens. From high in the sky, the moon shone through the barred windows. Ezio approached the knife blocks and pulled several knives out, testing them for balance. Not satisfied, he put them back and cast around for some other weapon. An iron ladle? No. A chopping board? No. A poker, perhaps? Yes! He went over to the stove and picked one out, three feet long and made of heavy steel. He tested it, making two or three practice passes with it.

He tensed at a noise from above. Seconds later, a body dropped past the window. Ezio saw Jun land in a crouch, then bolt into the night. He made for the door and unlocked it, flinging it open.

A Chinese man stood there, poised for attack, who instantly lunged at him with a *dao*. Ezio stepped back and slammed the door on the man's arm, smashing the radius and ulna. The sword dropped from his hand, as the Chinese howled in agony. Ezio threw the door open again and brought the poker down hard on the man's head, splitting the skull. He jumped over the corpse, and dashed outside.

He soon found Jun, engaged in combat with three attackers. It was going badly for her but he'd arrived in time to turn the tide, and the servants of the Jiajing Emperor retreated in the direction of the vineyard. There, they took a stand. Jun, fighting with only her fists and feet, took one of their opponents out almost immediately. Ezio brought down a second with his poker, ramming its point squarely into his attacker's face. But the third Chinese managed to knock the poker from his grasp, and it was only by reaching out fast for a wooden dowel, which he plucked from the vines, that he managed to regain his advantage, beating the man to the ground and then striking him hard on the nape of the neck, crushing the cervical vertebrae.

It was over. Ezio collapsed on the gentle slope among his vines, exhausted but uninjured. He caught Jun's eye and tried to laugh, but his laughter turned into a wheezing cough.

'I sound like a dying cat,' he said.

'Come on, I'll help you.'

She helped him to his feet, and together they returned to the villa.

90

They were awake long before break of day. The morning was cool. Some watery sunlight found its way through the haze.

Shao Jun stood in the road, her pack on her back. Staring into the distance, she was ready to depart. She seemed lost in thought, and only turned when Ezio approached from the villa. His breathing was still laboured and heavy.

He came up to her. ‘It is a long way home, *no*?’

‘But there is much to see along the way. *Dashi, xièxiè nin* – thank you, Mentor.’ She bowed slightly.

Ezio was carrying something. A small ancient box. He held it out to her. ‘Here. This may be of use one day.’

Jun took it, and turned it in her hands. She began to open it, but Ezio stopped her.

‘No,’ he said. ‘Only if you lose your way.’

She packed it away. Ezio squinted past Jun, peering up the road. He saw the banners of approaching soldiers.

‘You should go,’ he said.

Jun followed his gaze, nodded, and set off towards the vineyards that grew on the other side of the road. Ezio watched her as she made her way quickly over the brow of a nearby hill.

The soldiers rode up soon afterwards, and Ezio greeted them. When he looked in Jun’s direction once more, she had disappeared.

A few weeks later, the harvest done, and Marcello’s ninth birthday behind them, he was back in his den, trying to write again. He hadn’t made bad progress this time. He stared at the last blank sheet in front of him, then dipped his quill, and scribbled a few words, concentrating hard. He read them back, and smiled. Then he dropped his quill as a shooting pain in his chest caught him off guard.

There was a knock at the door.

‘Yes?’ he said, collecting himself, and replacing the quill in its stand by the inkwell.

Sofia entered the room.

‘Just taking the children down to Fiesole. We’ll be back just after dark.’

‘Good.’

‘Market day tomorrow. Are you coming with us?’

‘Yes.’

‘Sure?’

‘I’ll be fine.’

She closed the door behind her. Ezio sat brooding for a moment, then, satisfied, began gathering the papers on his desk, stacking them neatly, and tying a ribbon round them.

91

The next day was fine and fresh. They had stayed in Florence for lunch, and now Sofia was bent on making just a few more purchases before the journey home. Ezio, walking down the street a few paces behind his wife and children, suddenly winced as a fit of coughing took him. He leant against a wall for support.

In a moment Sofia was by his side.

'You should have stayed at home.'

He smiled at her. 'I am home.'

'Sit down, here.' She indicated a nearby bench. 'Wait for us. We'll be right over there. Only take a minute or two.'

He nodded, watching her rejoin the children and wander off a little farther down the street. He made himself comfortable, letting the pain subside.

He watched the people walking to and fro, going about their daily business. He felt pleased, and enjoyed watching them. He breathed in the smells of the market as it broke up around him. He listened to the sound the traders made.

'I love it here,' he said to himself. Home. Home at last.

His reverie was interrupted by the peevish voice of a young Italian who plumped himself down on the bench near him. The young man was talking, apparently, to himself. He didn't look at Ezio.

'*Al diavolo!* I hate this damn city. I wish I were in Rome! I hear the women there are … mmm … like ripe Sangiovese on the vine, you know? Not like here. *Firenze!*' He spat on the ground.

Ezio looked at him. 'I don't think Florence is your problem,' he remarked, distressed at what the young man had said.

'I beg your pardon?'

Ezio was about to reply, but the pain seized him again. He winced and started to gasp. The young man turned to him. 'Steady, old man.'

He grabbed Ezio's wrist as Ezio caught his breath. Looking down at the hand that held him, Ezio thought the grip was uncommonly strong, and there was something strange, almost familiar, about the man's expression. But he was probably imagining it all. He shook his head to clear it.

The young man looked at Ezio closely, and smiled. Ezio returned the look.

‘Get some rest, eh?’ the young man said.

He rose to his feet and walked away. Ezio nodded in belated agreement, watching him go. Then he leant back, seeking Sofia in the thinning crowd. He saw her at a stall, buying vegetables. And there beside her were Flavia and Marcello, baiting each other, playing together.

He closed his eyes, and took some deep breaths. His breathing calmed. The young man was right. He should get some rest …

Sofia was packing the vegetables she’d bought into a basket when something cold crept into her heart. She looked up, and then back to where Ezio sat. There was something about the way he was sitting. Confused, not wanting to admit what she feared to herself, she put a hand to her mouth, and hurried across to him, leaving the children playing where they were.

As she got closer, she slowed her pace. She finally sat down by his side, taking his hand, and then she leant forward, pressing her forehead against his hair.

One or two people looked in their direction, and then one or two more with concern but, otherwise, life in the street went on.

92

Much later that day, back home, and having sent Machiavelli away, Sofia took herself into the den. The children were in bed. She didn’t think what had happened had sunk in for them, yet.

In the den the fire had gone out. She lit a candle and walked to the desk, picking up the neatly stacked sheaf of papers, tied with a ribbon, which lay on it. She began to read:

> When I was a young man, I had liberty, but I did not see it; I had time, but I did not know it; and I had love, but I did not feel it. Many decades would pass before I understood the meaning of all three. And now, in the twilight of my life, this understanding has passed into contentment. Love, liberty and time, once so much at my disposal, are the fuels that drive me forward. Love, most especially, my dearest, for you, our children, our brothers and sisters … and for the vast and wonderful world that gave us life and keeps us guessing. With endless affection, my Sofia, I am forever yours.
>
> Ezio Auditore

Glossary of Italian, Greek, Chinese and Turkish Terms

a presto see you soon
adi herif pig
al diavolo to the Devil
affedersiniz excuse me
affedersiniz, efendim excuse me, sir
akçe old Turkish coin
Allah ashkina God willing
Allaha ismarladik! may God bless you!
aman Allahim oh dear!
amore love
apistefto unbelievable
arrocco castling
aynen oyle exactly

ballata ballad
bastardo bastard
bene good
beyfendi your excellence
bir sey degil you're welcome
bistecca alla fiorentina Florentine steak
brutti ma buoni ugly but good
buffone idiot
buon giorno good day
buona donna good lady
buona sera good evening

canaglia scoundrel
carciofini sott'olio baby artichokes cooked in olive oil

castagnaccio chestnut
cazzo dick/shit
che sucede? what's happening?
çok üzüldüm very good

dao sabre
dashi, xièxiè nin thank you, Mentor
dio mio my god
duìbùqi I'm sorry
duomo cathedral

è incredibile it's incredible
edáxi ok
efendim sir/mister
evet yes

fettunta garlic bread
finito finished
fratello mio my brother
fuori outside/get out!

Gennaio January
gerzek fool
ghazi holy warrior
Giugno June
grazie thank you
güle güle very good
güzel excellent

hajj pilgrimage
haydi rastgele good luck
hristé mou goodness me!

il diavolo the Devil
inanilmaz incredible

janbiyah Arab dagger, with a curved, broad blade

kanun law
karesi square
kargasha mayhem
kesinlikle absolutely
kouráyo courage
kyrie Lord

la Crociata Segreta the Secret Crusade
levatrice midwife
ling chi death of a thousand cuts
lokanta cafe/restaurant

maccaroin in brodo maccaroni soup
magnetismo magnetism
masa'il kher good evening
merda shit
merhaba welcome
messer sir
mia cara my dear
mio bel menestrello my handsome minstrel
mio principe my prince
moleche soft-shelled crab
molto curioso very curious

nessun problema no problem

pandiramerino rosemary bread
panzanella bread and tomato salad
pecorino a type of cheese
pek güzel quite beautiful
pekala all right
perdonate, buon signore pardon me, good sir
perfetto perfect

piena di vita full of life
poi kalà very good
prens prince
prego please
presuntuoso presumptuous (person)
principe prince

qián coin

raccolto harvest
ragazzo boy/kid
requiescat in Pace rest in peace
rixoto de gò goby risotto

sagliginiza! see you soon!
salame toscano Tuscan salami
salsicce di cinghiale wild boar sausage
salute a voi, Assassini greetings, Assassins
salve hi
sayin da Vinci bey Mr da Vinci, sir
se solo if only!
serefe! cheers!
sharbat sherbet
shehzad/shehzadem prince
sì yes
sì, da molto tempo yes, a long time
sinav icin iyi sanslar! good luck to you, my friend
souk market/bazaar
sövalye knight
spaghetti allo scoglio seafood pasta

tesekkür ederim thank you
Tesekkür, Mentor. Chok tesekkür ederim! Thank you, mentor. Thank you very much.
tesoro my darling

ti distihìa what misery
tonno al cartoccio freshly baked tuna in breadcrumbs

un favore a favour
una tortura torture

va bene all right
vendange grape harvest
veraison grape-ripening

List of Characters

Abbas: enemy of Altaïr ibn-La’Ahad
Al Mualim: Mentor of the Brotherhood in the twelfth century
al-Scarab: pirate captain, scourge of the White Sea
Altaïr ibn-La’Ahad: Mentor of the Assassins
Bartolomeo d’Alviano: friend of Ezio
Bekir: Larnaka agent
Captain Tarik Barleti: Captain of the Sultan’s bodyguard the Janissaries
Claudia Auditore: Ezio’s sister
Darim: Maria and Altaïr’s son
Dilara: Tarik’s principal agent
Dogan: Assassin lieutenant to Yusuf
Domenico Garofoli: governor of Cyprus
Duccio Dovizi
Ezio Auditore da Firenze: the Mentor
Haras: traitor to the Brotherhood in the twelfth century
Leonardo da Vinci: artist, scientist, sculptor, etc., 1452–1519
Ma’Mun: shipping agent
Manuel Palaiologos: Byzantine prince, heir of the last Byzantine emperor, would be emperor
Maria Thorpe: Altaïr’s English wife
Niccolò di Bernardo dei Machiavelli: Assassin, philosopher and writer, 1469–1527
Piri Reis: admiral and manager of the Turkish merchant fleet
Prince Ahmet Osman: Prince Suleiman’s uncle, the Sultan’s favourite son
Prince Selim Osman: Prince Suleiman’s father and brother to Ahmet
Prince Suleiman Osman: Sultan Bayezid’s grandson and Governor of Kefe
Shahkulu: Manuel’s bodyguard and Türkmeni renegade

Sofia Sartor: bookshop owner
Sultan Bayezid
Yusuf Tazim: Leader of the Istanbul Assassins

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Etienne Allonier
Maria Loreto
Alex Clarke
Alice Shepherd
Anton Gill
Guillaume Carmona
Clémence Deleuze

Oliver Bowden

ASSASSIN'S CREED®

Forsaken

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Prologue

I never knew him. Not really. I thought I had, but it wasn't until I read his journal that I realized I hadn't really known him at all. And it's too late now. Too late to tell him I misjudged him. Too late to tell him I'm sorry.

Part One

Extracts from the Journal of Haytham E. Kenway

6 December 1735

i

Two days ago I should have been celebrating my tenth birthday at my home in Queen Anne's Square. Instead my birthday has gone unremarked; there are no celebrations, only funerals, and our burnt-out house is like a blackened, rotted tooth among the tall, white-brick mansions of Queen Anne's Square.

For the time being we're staying in one of Father's properties in Bloomsbury. It's a nice house, and though the family is devastated and our lives torn apart, there is that to be thankful for at least. Here we'll stay, shocked, in limbo – like troubled ghosts – until our future is decided.

The blaze ate my journals so beginning this feels like starting anew. That being the case, I should probably begin with my name, which is Haytham, an Arabic name, for an English boy whose home is London, and who from birth until two days ago lived an idyllic life sheltered from the worst of the filth that exists elsewhere in the city. From Queen Anne's Square we could see the fog and smoke that hung over the river, and like everybody else we were bothered by the stink, which I can only describe as 'wet horse', but we didn't have to tread through the rivers of stinking waste from tanneries, butchers' shops and the backsides of animals and people. The rancid streams of effluent that hasten the passage of disease: dysentery, cholera, polio …

'You must wrap up, Master Haytham. Or the lerg'll get you.'

On walks across the fields to Hampstead my nurses used to steer me away from the poor unfortunates wracked with coughs, and shielded my eyes from children with deformities. More than anything they feared disease. I suppose because you cannot reason with disease; you can't bribe it or take arms against it, and it respects neither wealth nor standing. It is an implacable foe.

And of course it attacks without warning. So every evening they checked me for signs of measles or the pox then reported on my good health to Mother, who came to kiss me good night. I was one of the lucky ones, you see, who had a mother to kiss me good night, and a father who did, too; who loved me and my half-sister, Jenny, who told me about rich and poor, who instilled in me my good

fortune and urged me always to think of others; and who employed tutors and nursemaids to look after and educate me, so that I should grow up to be a man of good values, and of worth to the world. One of the lucky ones. Not like the children who have to work in fields and in factories and up chimneys.

I wondered sometimes, though, did they have friends, those other children? If they did, then, while of course I knew better than to envy them their lives when mine was so much more comfortable, I envied them that one thing: their friends. Me, I had none, with no brothers or sisters close to my age either, and, as for making them, well, I was shy. Besides, there was another problem: something that had come to light when I was just five years old.

It happened one afternoon. The mansions of Queen Anne's Square were built close together, so we'd often see our neighbours, either in the square itself or in their grounds at the rear. On one side of us lived a family who had four girls, two around my age. They spent what seemed like hours skipping or playing blind man's buff in their garden, and I used to hear them as I sat in the schoolroom under the watchful eye of my tutor, Old Mr Fayling, who had bushy grey eyebrows and a habit of picking his nose, carefully studying whatever it was that he'd dug from the recesses of his nostrils then surreptitiously eating it.

This particular afternoon Old Mr Fayling left the room and I waited until his footsteps had receded before getting up from my sums, going to the window and gazing out at the grounds of the mansion next door.

Dawson was the family name. Mr Dawson was an MP, so my father said, barely hiding his scowl. They had a high-walled garden, and, despite the trees, bushes and foliage in full bloom, parts of it were visible from my schoolroom window, so I could see the Dawson girls outside. They were playing hopscotch for a change, and had laid out pall-mall mallets for a makeshift course, although it didn't look as if they were taking it very seriously; probably the two older ones were trying to teach the two younger ones the finer points of the game. A blur of pigtails and pink, crinkly dresses, they were calling and laughing, and occasionally I'd hear the sound of an adult voice, a nursemaid probably, hidden from my sight beneath a low canopy of trees.

My sums were left unattended on the table for a moment as I watched them play, until suddenly, almost as if she could *sense* she was being watched, one of the younger ones, a year or so my junior, looked up, saw me at the window, and our eyes locked.

I gulped, then very hesitantly raised a hand to wave. To my surprise she beamed back. And next she was calling her sisters, who gathered round, all four of them, excitedly craning their necks and shielding their eyes from the sun to gaze up at the schoolroom window, where I stood like an exhibit at a museum –

except a moving exhibit that waved and went slightly pink with embarrassment, but even so felt the soft, warm glow of something that might have been friendship.

Which evaporated the moment their nursemaid appeared from beneath the cover of the trees, glanced crossly up at my window with a look that left me in no doubt what she thought of me – a peeping Tom or worse – then ushered all four girls out of sight.

That look the nursemaid gave me I'd seen before, and I'd see it again, on the square or in the fields behind us. Remember how my nurses steered me away from the ragged unfortunates? Other nursemaids kept their children away from me like that. I never really wondered why. I didn't question it because … I don't know, because there was no reason to question it, I suppose; it was just something that happened and I knew no different.

ii

When I was six, Edith presented me with a bundle of pressed clothes and a pair of silver-buckled shoes.

I emerged from behind the screen wearing my new shiny-buckled shoes, a waistcoat and a jacket, and Edith called one of the maids, who said I looked the spitting image of my father, which of course was the idea.

Later on, my parents came to see me, and I could have sworn Father's eyes misted up a little, while Mother made no pretence at all and simply burst out crying there and then in the nursery, flapping her hand until Edith passed her a handkerchief.

Standing there, I felt grown-up and learned, even as I felt the hotness in my cheeks again. I found myself wondering if the Dawson girls would have considered me rather fine in my new suit, quite the gentleman. I'd thought of them often. I'd catch sight of them from the window sometimes, running along their garden or being shepherded into carriages at the front of the mansions. I fancied I saw one of them steal a glance up at me once, but if she saw me there were no smiles or waves that time, just a shadow of that same look worn by the nursemaid, as though disapproval of me was being handed down, like arcane knowledge.

So we had the Dawsons on one side; those elusive, pigtailed, skipping Dawsons, while on the other side were the Barretts. They were a family of eight children, boys and girls, although again I rarely saw them; as with the Dawsons, my encounters were restricted to the sight of them getting into carriages, or seeing them at a distance in the fields. Then, one day shortly before my eighth

birthday, I was in the garden, strolling along the perimeter and dragging a stick along the crumbling red brick of the high garden wall. Occasionally I'd stop to overturn stones with a stick and inspect whatever insects scuttled from beneath – woodlice, millipedes, worms that wriggled as though stretching out their long bodies – when I came upon the door that led on to a passage between our home and the Barretts'.

The heavy gate was padlocked with a huge, rusting chunk of metal that looked as if it hadn't been opened for years, and I stared at it for a while, weighing the lock in my palm, when I heard a whispered, urgent, boyish voice.

'Say, you. Is it true what they say about your father?'

It came from the other side of the gate, although it took me a moment or so to place it – a moment in which I stood shocked and almost rigid with fear. Next, I almost jumped out of my skin when I saw through a hole in the door an unblinking eye that was watching me. Again came the question.

'Come on, they'll be beckoning me in any minute. Is it true what they say about your father?'

Calming, I bent to bring my eye level with the hole in the door. 'Who is this?' I asked.

'It's me, Tom, who lives next door.'

I knew that Tom was the youngest of their brood, about my age. I'd heard his name being called.

'Who are you?' he said. 'I mean, what's your name?'

'Haytham,' I replied, and I wondered if Tom was my new friend. He had a friendly looking eyeball, at least.

'That's a strange sort of name.'

'It's Arabic. It means "young eagle".'

'Well, that makes sense.'

'How do you mean, "makes sense"?'

'Oh, I don't know. It just does somehow. And there's only you, is there?'

'And my sister,' I retorted. 'And Mother and Father.'

'Pretty small sort of family.'

I nodded.

'Look,' he pressed. 'Is it true or not? Is your father what they say he is? And don't even think about lying. I can see your eyes, you know. I'll be able to tell if you're lying straight away.'

'I won't lie. I don't even know what "they" say he is, or even who "they" are.'

At the same time I was getting an odd and not altogether pleasant feeling: that somewhere existed an idea of what constituted 'normal', and that we, the Kenway family, were not included in it.

Perhaps the owner of the eyeball heard something in my tone, because he hastened to add, ‘I’m sorry – I’m sorry if I said something out of turn. I was just interested, that’s all. You see, there is a rumour, and it’s awfully exciting if it’s true …’

‘What rumour?’

‘You’ll think it’s silly.’

Feeling brave, I drew close to the hole and looked at him, eyeball to eyeball, saying, ‘What do you mean? What do people say about Father?’

He blinked. ‘They say he used to be a –’

Suddenly there was a noise from behind him, and I heard an angry male voice call his name: *‘Thomas!’*

The shock sent him backwards. ‘Oh, bother,’ he whispered quickly. ‘I’ve got to go, I’m being called. See you around, I hope?’

And with that he was gone and I was left wondering what he meant. What rumour? What were people saying about us, our *small* family?

At the same time I remembered that I had better get a move on. It was nearly midday – and time for my weapons training.

7 December 1735

i

I feel invisible, like I'm stuck in a limbo between the past and the future. Around me the grown-ups hold tense conversations. Their faces are drawn and the ladies weep. Fires are kept lit, of course, but the house is empty apart from the few of us and what possessions we saved from the burnt-out mansion, and it feels permanently cold. Outside, snow has started to fall, while indoors is a sorrow that chills the very bones.

With little else for me to do but write my journal, I had hoped to get up to date with the story of my life so far, but it seems there's more to say than I'd first thought, and of course there have been other important matters to attend to. Funerals. Edith today.

'Are you sure, Master Haytham?' Betty had asked earlier, with her forehead creased in concern, her eyes tired. For years – as long as I could remember – she had assisted Edith. She was as bereaved as I was.

'Yes,' I said, dressed as ever in my suit and, for today, a black tie. Edith had been alone in the world, so it was the surviving Kenways and staff who gathered for a funeral feast below stairs, for ham and ale and cake. When that was over, the men from the funeral company, who were already quite drunk, loaded her body into the hearse for taking to the chapel. Behind it we took our seats in mourning carriages. We only needed two of them. When it was over I retired to my room, to continue with my story …

ii

A couple of days after I'd spoken to Tom Barrett's eyeball, what he'd said was still playing on my mind. So one morning when Jenny and I were both alone in the drawing room together, I decided to ask her about it.

Jenny. I was nearly eight and she was twenty-one, and we had as much in common as I did with the man who delivered the coal. Less, probably, if I

thought about it, because at least the man who delivered the coal and I both liked to laugh, whereas I'd rarely seen Jenny smile, let alone laugh.

She has black hair that shines, and her eyes are dark and … well, 'sleepy' is what I'd say, although I'd heard them described as 'brooding', and at least one admirer went so far as to say she had a 'smoky stare', whatever that is. Jenny's looks were a popular topic of conversation. She is a great beauty, or so I'm often told.

Although not to me. She was just Jenny, who'd refused to play with me so often I'd long since given up asking her; who whenever I picture her was sitting in a high-backed chair, head bent over her sewing, or embroidery – whatever it was she did with a needle and thread. And scowling. That smoky stare her admirers said she had? I called it scowling.

The thing was, despite the fact that we were little more than guests in each other's lives, like ships sailing around the same small harbour, passing closely but never making contact, we had the same father. And Jenny, being twelve years older than me, knew more about him than I did. So even though I'd had years of her telling me I was too stupid or too young to understand – or too stupid *and* too young to understand; and once even too *short* to understand, whatever that was supposed to mean – I used to try to engage her in conversation. I don't know why, because, as I say, I always came away none the wiser. To annoy her perhaps. But on this particular occasion, a couple of days or so after my conversation with Tom's eyeball, it was because I was genuinely curious to find out what Tom had meant.

So I asked her: 'What do people say about us?'

She sighed theatrically and looked up from her needlework.

'What do you mean, Squirt?' she asked.

'Just that – what do people say about us?'

'Are you talking about gossip?'

'If you like.'

'And what would you care about gossip? Aren't you a bit too –'

'I care,' I interrupted, before we got on to the subject of me being too young, too stupid or too short.

'Do you? Why?'

'Somebody said something, that's all.'

She put down her work, tucking it by the chair cushion at the side of her leg, and pursed her lips. 'Who? Who said it and what did they say?'

'A boy at the gate in the grounds. He said our family was strange and that Father was a …'

'What?'

‘I never found out.’

She smiled and picked up her needlework. ‘And that’s what set you thinking, is it?’

‘Well, wouldn’t it you?’

‘I already know everything I need to know,’ she said haughtily, ‘and I tell you this, I couldn’t give two figs what they say about us in the house next door.’

‘Well, tell me then,’ I said. ‘What *did* Father do before I was born?’

Jenny did smile, sometimes. She smiled when she had the upper hand, when she could exert a little power over someone – especially if that someone was me.

‘You’ll find out,’ she said.

‘When?’

‘All in good time. After all, you are his *male heir*.’

There was a long pause. ‘How do you mean, “male heir”?’ I asked. ‘What’s the difference between that and what you are?’

She sighed. ‘Well, at the moment, not much, although you have weapons training, and I don’t.’

‘You don’t?’ But on reflection I already knew that, and I suppose I had wondered why it was that I did swordcraft and she did needlecraft.

‘No, Haytham, I don’t have weapons training. No child has weapons training, Haytham, not in Bloomsbury anyway, and maybe not in all of London. Nobody but you. Haven’t you been told?’

‘Told what?’

‘Not to say anything.’

‘Yes, but …’

‘Well, didn’t you ever wonder why – *why* you’re not supposed to say anything?’

Maybe I had. Maybe I secretly knew all along. I said nothing.

‘You’ll soon find out what’s in store for you,’ she said. ‘Our lives have been mapped out for us, don’t you worry about that.’

‘Well, then, what’s in store for you?’

She snorted derisively. ‘*What?* is in store for me is the wrong question. *Who?* is in store would be more accurate.’ There was a trace of something in her voice that I wouldn’t quite understand until much later, and I looked at her, knowing better than to enquire further, and risk feeling the sting of that needle. But when I eventually put down the book I had been reading and left the drawing room, I did so knowing that although I had learnt almost nothing about my father or family, I’d learnt something about Jenny: why she never smiled; why she was always so antagonistic towards me.

It was because she'd seen the future. She'd seen the future and knew it favoured me, for no better reason than I had been born male.

I might have felt sorry for her. Might have done – if she hadn't been such a sourpuss.

Knowing what I now knew, though, weapons training the following day had an extra frisson. So: nobody else had weapons training but me. Suddenly it felt as though I were tasting forbidden fruit, and the fact that my father was my tutor only made it more succulent. If Jenny was right and there was some calling I was being groomed to answer, like other boys are trained for the priesthood, or as blacksmiths, butchers or carpenters, then good. That suited me fine. There was nobody in the world I looked up to more than Father. The thought that he was passing on his knowledge to me was at once comforting and thrilling.

And, of course, it involved swords. What more could a boy want? Looking back, I know that from that day on I became a more willing and enthusiastic pupil. Every day, either at midday or after evening meal, depending on Father's diary, we convened in what we called the training room but was actually the games room. And it was there that my sword skills began to improve.

I haven't trained since the attack. I haven't had the heart to pick up a blade at all, but I know that when I do I'll picture that room, with its dark, oak-panelled walls, bookshelves and the covered billiard table which had been moved aside to make space. And in it my father, his bright eyes, sharp but kindly, and always smiling, always encouraging me: block, parry, footwork, balance, awareness, anticipation. Those words he repeated like a mantra, sometimes saying nothing else for an entire lesson at a time, just barking the commands, nodding when I got it right, shaking his head when I did it wrong, occasionally pausing, scooping his hair out of his face and going to the back of me to position my arms and legs.

To me, they are – or were – the sights and sounds of weapons training: the bookshelves, the billiard table, my father's mantras and the sound of ringing …

Wood.

Yes, wood.

Wooden training swords we used, much to my chagrin. Steel would come later, he'd say, whenever I complained.

iii

On the morning of my birthday, Edith was extra-specially nice to me and Mother made sure I was given a birthday breakfast of my favourites: sardines with mustard sauce, and fresh bread with cherry jam made from the fruit of the trees in our grounds. I caught Jenny giving me a sneering look as I tucked in but paid

it no mind. Since our conversation in the drawing room, whatever power she'd had over me, slim as it had been, had somehow been made less distinct. Before that I might have taken her ridicule to heart, maybe felt a little silly and self-conscious about my birthday breakfast. But not that day. Thinking back, I wonder if my eighth birthday marked the day I began to change from boy to man.

So no, I didn't care about the curl of Jenny's lip, or the pig noises she made surreptitiously. I had eyes only for Mother and Father, who had eyes only for me. I could tell by their body language, tiny little parental codes I'd picked up over the years, that something else was to come; that my birthday pleasures were set to continue. And so it proved. By the end of the meal my father had announced that tonight we would be going to White's Chocolate House on Chesterfield Street, where the hot chocolate is made from *solid blocks of cocoa* imported from Spain.

Later that day I stood with Edith and Betty fussing around me, dressing me in my smartest suit. Then the four of us were stepping into a carriage at the kerb outside, where I sneaked a look up at the windows of our neighbours and wondered if the faces of the Dawson girls were pressed to the glass, or Tom and his brothers. I hoped so. I hoped they could see me now. See us all and think, 'There go the Kenway family, out for the evening, just like a normal family.'

iv

The area around Chesterfield Street was busy. We were able to draw up directly outside White's and, once there, our door was opened and we were helped quickly across the crowded thoroughfare, and inside.

Even so, during that short walk between the carriage and the sanctuary of the chocolate house, I looked to my left and right and saw a little of London red in tooth and claw: the body of a dog lying in the gutter, a derelict retching against some railings, flower sellers, beggars, drunkards, urchins splashing in a river of mud that seemed to seethe on the street.

And then we were inside, greeted by the thick scent of smoke, ale, perfume and of course chocolate, as well as a hubbub of piano and raised voices. People, all of whom were shouting, leaned over gaming tables. Men drank from huge tankards of ale; women, too. I saw some with hot chocolate and cake. Everybody, it seemed, was in a state of high excitement.

I looked at Father, who had stopped short, and sensed his discomfort. For a moment I was concerned he'd simply turn and leave, before a gentleman holding his cane aloft caught my eye. Younger than Father, with an easy smile and a

twinkle that was visible even across the room, he was waggling the cane at us. Until with a grateful wave, Father acknowledged him and began to lead us across the room, squeezing between tables, stepping over dogs and even one or two children, who scrabbled at the feet of revellers, presumably hoping for whatever might fall off the gaming tables: pieces of cake, maybe coins.

We reached the gentleman with the cane. Unlike Father, whose hair was straggly and barely tied back with a bow, he wore a white powdered wig, the back of it secured in a black silk bag, and a frock coat in a deep, rich red colour. With a nod, he greeted Father then turned his attention to me and made an exaggerated bow. 'Good evening, Master Haytham, I believe that many happy returns of the day are in order. Remind me please of your age, sir? I can see from your bearing that you are a child of great maturity. Eleven? Twelve, perhaps?'

As he said this he glanced over my shoulder with a twinkly smile and my mother and father chuckled appreciatively.

'I am eight, sir,' I said, and puffed up proudly, as my father completed the introductions. The gentleman was Reginald Birch, one of his senior property managers, and Mr Birch said he was delighted to make my acquaintance then greeted my mother with a long bow, kissing the back of her hand.

His attention went to Jenny next, and he took her hand, bent his head and pressed his lips to it. I knew enough to realize that what he was doing was courtship, and I glanced quickly over to Father, expecting him to step in.

Instead what I saw was he and Mother looking thrilled, though Jenny was stony-faced, and stayed that way as we were led to a private back room of the chocolate house and seated, she and Mr Birch side by side, as the White's staff began to busy themselves around us.

I could have stayed there all night, having my fill of hot chocolate and cake, copious amounts of which were delivered to the table. Both Father and Mr Birch seemed to enjoy the ale. So in the end it was Mother who insisted we leave – before I was sick, or they were – and we stepped out into the night, which if anything had become even busier in the intervening hours.

For a moment or so I found myself disorientated by the noise and the stench of the street. Jenny wrinkled her nose, and I saw a flicker of concern pass across my mother's face. Instinctively, Father moved closer towards us all, as if to try and ward off the clamour.

A filthy hand was thrust in front of my face and I looked up to see a beggar silently appealing for money with wide, beseeching eyes, bright white in contrast to the dirt of his face and hair; a flower seller tried to bustle past Father to reach Jenny, and gave an outraged 'Oi' when Mr Birch used his cane to block her path.

I felt myself being jostled, saw two urchins trying to reach us with their palms out.

Then suddenly my mother gave a cry as a man burst from within the crowd, clothes ragged and dirty, teeth bared and his hand outstretched, about to snatch my mother's necklace.

And in the next second I discovered why Father's cane had that curious rattle, as I saw a blade appear from within as he span to protect Mother. He covered the distance to her in the blink of an eye, but before it cleared its scabbard, he changed his mind, perhaps seeing the thief was unarmed, and replaced it, ramming it home with a thump and making it a cane once again, in the same movement twirling it to knock the ruffian's hand aside.

The thief shrieked in pain and surprise and backed straight into Mr Birch, who hurled him to the street and pounced on him, his knees on the man's chest and a dagger at his throat. I caught my breath.

I saw Mother's eyes widen over Father's shoulder.

'Reginald!' called Father. *'Stop!'*

'He tried to rob you, Edward,' said Mr Birch, without turning. The thief snivelled. The tendons on Mr Birch's hands stood out and his knuckles were white on the handle of the dagger.

'No, Reginald, this is not the way,' said my father calmly. He stood with his arms around Mother, who had buried her face in his chest and was whimpering softly. Jenny stood close by at one side, me at another. Around us a crowd had gathered, the same vagrants and beggars who had been bothering us now keeping a respectful distance. A respectful, *frightened* distance.

'I mean it, Reginald,' said Father. 'Put the dagger away, let him go.'

'Don't make me look foolish like this, Edward,' said Birch. 'Not in front of everybody like this, please. We both know this man deserves to pay, if not with his life then perhaps with a finger or two.'

I caught my breath.

'No!' commanded Father. 'There will be no bloodshed, Reginald. Any association between us will end if you do not do as I say this very moment.' A hush seemed to fall on everybody around us. I could hear the thief gibbering, saying over and over again, 'Please sir, please sir, please sir …' His arms were pinned to his sides, his legs kicking and scraping uselessly on the filth-covered cobbles as he lay trapped.

Until, at last, Mr Birch seemed to decide, and the dagger withdrew, leaving a small bleeding nick behind. When he stood he aimed a kick at the thief, who needed no further encouragement to scramble to his hands and knees and take off into Chesterfield Street, grateful to escape with his life.

Our carriage driver had recovered his wits, and now stood by the door, urging us to hurry to the safety of our carriage.

And Father and Mr Birch stood facing one another, their eyes locked. As Mother hurried me past, I saw Mr Birch's eyes blazing. I saw my father's gaze meet him equally, and he offered his hand to shake, saying, 'Thank you, Reginald. On behalf of all of us, thank you for your quick thinking.'

I felt my mother's hand in the small of my back as she tried to shove me into the carriage, and craned my head back to see Father, his hand held out to Mr Birch, who glared at him, refusing to accept the offer of accord.

Then, just as I was bundled into the carriage, I saw Mr Birch reach to grasp Father's hand and his glare melt away into a smile – a slightly embarrassed, bashful smile, as though he'd just remembered himself. The two shook hands and my father awarded Mr Birch with the short nod that I knew so well. It meant that everything had been settled. It meant that no more need be said about it.

v

At last we returned home to Queen Anne's Square, where we bolted the door and banished the smell of smoke and manure and horse, and I told Mother and Father how much I had enjoyed my evening, thanked them profusely and assured them that the commotion in the street afterwards had done nothing to spoil my evening, while privately thinking that it had been a highlight.

But it turned out the evening wasn't over yet, because as I went to climb the stairs, my father beckoned me follow him instead, and led the way to the games room, where he lit a paraffin lamp.

'You enjoyed your evening, then, Haytham,' he said.

'I enjoyed it very much, sir,' I said.

'What was your impression of Mr Birch?'

'I liked him very much, sir.'

Father chuckled. 'Reginald is a man who sets great store by appearance, by manners and etiquette and edict. He is not like some, who wear etiquette and protocol as a badge only when it suits them. He is a man of honour.'

'Yes, sir,' I said, but I must have sounded as doubtful as I felt, because he looked at me sharply.

'Ah,' he said, 'you're thinking about what happened afterwards?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Well – what about it?'

He beckoned me over to one of the bookshelves. He seemed to want me closer to the light and his eyes to stare at my face. The lamplight played across his

features and his dark hair shone. His eyes were always kindly but they could also be intense, as they were now. I noticed one of his scars, which seemed to shine more brightly in the light.

'Well, it was very exciting, sir,' I replied; adding quickly, 'Though I was most concerned for Mother. Your speed in saving her – I've never seen anybody move so quickly.'

He laughed. 'Love will do that to a man. You'll find that out for yourself one day. But what of Mr Birch? His response? What did you make of it, Haytham?'

'Sir?'

'Mr Birch seemed about to administer severe punishment to the scoundrel, Haytham. Did you think it was deserved?'

I considered it before answering. I could tell from the look on Father's face, sharp and watchful, that my answer was important.

And in the heat of the moment I suppose I had thought the thief deserved a harsh response. There had been an instant, brief as it was, when some primal anger wished him harm for the attack on my mother. Now, though, in the soft glow of the lamp, with Father looking kindly upon me, I felt differently.

'Tell me honestly, Haytham,' prompted Father, as though reading my thoughts. 'Reginald has a keen sense of justice, or what he describes as justice. It's somewhat … *Biblical*. But what did you think?'

'At first I felt an urge for … revenge, sir. But it soon passed, and I was pleased to see the man granted clemency,' I said.

Father smiled and nodded, and then abruptly turned to the bookshelves, where with a flick of his wrist he operated a switch, causing a portion of books to slide across to reveal a secret compartment. My heart skipped a beat as he took something from it: a box, which he handed to me and, nodding, bade me open.

'A birthday present, Haytham,' he said.

I knelt and placed the box on the floor, opened it to reveal a leather belt that I plucked quickly away, knowing that beneath would be a sword, and not a wooden play sword but a shimmering steel sword with an ornate handle. I took it from the box and held it in my hands. It was a short sword and, though, shamefully, I felt a twinge of disappointment about that, I knew at once that it was a *beautiful* short sword, and it was *my* short sword. I decided at once that it would never leave my side, and was already reaching for the belt when Father stopped me.

'No, Haytham,' he said, 'it stays in here, and is not to be removed or even used without my permission. Is that clear?' He had collected the sword from me and already replaced it in the box, placing the belt on top and closing it.

‘Soon you will begin to train with this sword,’ he continued. ‘There is much for you to learn, Haytham, not only about the steel you hold in your hands, but also the steel in your heart.’

‘Yes, Father,’ I said, trying not to look as confused and disappointed as I felt. I watched as he turned and replaced the box in the secret compartment, and if he was trying to make sure that I didn’t see which book triggered the compartment, well, then, he failed. It was the King James Bible.

8 December 1735

i

There were two more funerals today, of the two soldiers who had been stationed in the grounds. As far as I know, Father’s gentleman, Mr Digweed, attended the service for the captain, whose name I never knew, but nobody from our household was at the funeral for the second man. There is so much loss and mourning around us at the moment, it’s as if there simply isn’t room for any more, callous as it sounds.

ii

After my eighth birthday, Mr Birch became a regular visitor to the house and, when not squiring Jenny on walks around the grounds, or taking her into town in his carriage, or sitting in the drawing room drinking tea and sherry and regaling the women with tales of army life, he held meetings with Father. It was clear to all that he intended to marry Jenny and that the union had Father’s blessing, but there was talk that Mr Birch had asked to postpone the nuptials; that he wanted to be as prosperous as possible so that Jenny should have the husband she deserved, and that he had his eye on a mansion in Southwark in order to keep her in the manner to which she’d become accustomed.

Mother and Father were thrilled about that of course. Jenny less so. I’d occasionally see her with red eyes, and she’d developed a habit of flying quickly out of rooms, either in the throes of an angry tantrum or with her hand to her mouth, stifling tears. More than once I heard Father say, ‘She’ll come round,’ and on one occasion he gave me a sideways look and rolled his eyes.

Just as she seemed to wither under the weight of her future, I flourished with the anticipation of my own. The love I felt for Father constantly threatened to engulf me with its sheer magnitude; I didn’t just love him, I idolized him. At times it was as if the two of us shared a knowledge that was secret from the rest of the world. For example, he’d often ask me what my tutors had been teaching me, listen intently, and then say, ‘Why?’ Whenever he asked me something,

whether it was about religion, ethics or morality, he would know if I gave the answer by rote, or repeated it parrot fashion, and he'd say, 'Well, you've just told me what Old Mr Fayling thinks,' or, 'We know what a centuries-old writer thinks. But what does it say in here, Haytham?' and he'd place a hand to my chest.

I realize now what he was doing. Old Mr Fayling was teaching me facts and absolutes; Father was asking me to question them. This knowledge I was being given by Old Mr Fayling – where did it originate? Who wielded the quill, and why should I trust that man?

Father used to say, 'To see differently, we must first think differently,' and it sounds stupid, and you might laugh, or I might look back on this in years to come and laugh myself, but at times it felt as though I could feel my brain actually *expand* to look at the world in Father's way. He had a way of looking at the world that nobody else had, so it seemed; a way of looking at the world that challenged the very idea of *truth*.

Of course, I questioned Old Mr Fayling. I *challenged* him one day, during Scriptures, and earned myself a whack across the knuckles with his cane, along with the promise that he would be informing my father, which he did. Later, Father took me into his study and, after closing the door, grinned and tapped the side of his nose. 'It's often best, Haytham, to keep your thoughts to yourself. Hide in plain sight.'

So I did. And I found myself looking at the people around me, trying to look inside them as though I might be able somehow to divine how they looked at the world, the Old Mr Fayling way, or the Father way.

Writing this now, of course, I can see I was getting too big for my boots; I was feeling grown-up beyond my years, which would be as unattractive now, at ten, as it would have been at eight, then nine. Probably I was unbearably supercilious. Probably I felt like the little man of the household. When I turned nine, Father presented me with a bow and arrow for my birthday and, practising with it in the grounds, I hoped that the Dawson girls or the Barrett children might be watching me from the windows.

It had been over a year since I'd spoken to Tom at the gate, but I still sometimes loitered there in the hope of meeting him again. Father was forthcoming on all subjects except his own past. He'd never speak of his life before London, nor of Jenny's mother, so I still held out hope that whatever it was Tom knew might prove illuminating. And, apart from that, of course, I wanted a friend. Not a parent or nursemaid or tutor or mentor – I had plenty of those. Just a friend. And I hoped it would be Tom.

It never will be now, of course.

They bury him tomorrow.

9 December 1735

i

Mr Digweed came to see me this morning. He knocked, waited for my reply then had to duck his head to enter, because Mr Digweed, as well as being balding, with slightly bulging eyes and veiny eyelids, is tall and slim, and the doorways in our emergency residence are much lower than they were at home. The way he had to stoop as he moved around the place, it added to his air of discomfiture, the sense of him being a fish out of water here. He'd been my father's gentleman since before I was born, at least since the Kenways settled in London, and like all of us, maybe even more than the rest of us, he belonged to Queen Anne's Square. What made his pain even more acute was guilt – his guilt that on the night of the attack he was away, attending to family matters in Herefordshire; he and our driver had returned the morning after the attack.

'I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me, Master Haytham,' he had said to me in the days after, his face pale and drawn.

'Of course, Digweed,' I said, and didn't know what to say next; I'd never been comfortable addressing him by his surname; it had never felt right in my mouth. So all I could add was 'Thank you.'

This morning his cadaverous face wore the same solemn expression, and I could tell that, whatever news he had, it was bad.

'Master Haytham,' he said, standing before me.

'Yes … Digweed?'

'I'm terribly sorry, Master Haytham, but there's been a message from Queen Anne's Square, from the Barretts. They wish to make it clear that nobody from the Kenway household is welcome at young Master Thomas's funeral service. They respectfully request that no contact is made at all.'

'Thank you, Digweed,' I said, and watched as he gave a short, sorrowful bow then dipped his head to avoid the low beam of the doorway as he left.

I stood there for some time, gazing emptily at the space where he'd stood, until Betty returned to help me out of my funeral suit and into my everyday one.

ii

One afternoon a few weeks ago, I was below stairs, playing in the short corridor that led off the servants' hall to the heavily barred door of the plate room. It was in the plate room that the family valuables were stored: silverware which only ever saw the light of day on the rare occasions Mother and Father entertained guests; family heirlooms, Mother's jewellery and some of Father's books that he considered of greatest value – irreplaceable books. He kept the key to the plate room with him at all times, on a loop around his belt, and I had only ever seen him entrust it to Mr Digweed, and then only for short periods.

I liked to play in the corridor nearby because it was so rarely visited, which meant I was never bothered by nursemaids, who would invariably tell me to get off the dirty floor before I wore a hole in my trousers; or by other well-meaning staff, who would engage me in polite conversation and oblige me to answer questions about my education or non-existent friends; or perhaps even by Mother or Father, who would tell me to get off the dirty floor before I wore a hole in my trousers and *then* force me to answer questions about my education or non-existent friends. Or, worse than any of them, by Jenny, who would sneer at whatever game I was playing and, if it was toy soldiers, make a malicious effort to kick over each and every tin man of them.

No, the passageway between the servants' hall and the plate room was one of the few places at Queen Anne's Square where I could realistically hope to avoid any of these things, so the passageway is where I went when I didn't want to be disturbed.

Except on this occasion, when a new face emerged in the form of Mr Birch, who let himself into the passage just as I was about to arrange my troops. I had a lantern with me, placed on the stone floor, and the candle fire flickered and popped in the draught as the passage door opened. From my position on the floor, I saw the hem of his frock coat and the tip of his cane, and as my eyes travelled up to see him looking down upon me, I wondered if he, too, kept a sword hidden in his cane, and if it would rattle, the way my father's did.

'Master Haytham, I rather hoped I might find you here,' he said with a smile. 'I was wondering, are you busy?'

I scrambled to my feet. 'Just playing, sir,' I said quickly. 'Is there something wrong?'

'Oh no,' he laughed. 'In fact, the last thing I want to do is disturb your playtime, though there is something I was hoping to discuss with you.'

'Of course,' I said, nodding, my heart sinking at the thought of yet another round of questions concerning my prowess at arithmetic. Yes, I enjoyed my

sums. Yes, I enjoyed writing. Yes, I one day hoped to be as clever as my father. Yes, I one day hoped to follow him into the family business.

But with a wave of his hand Mr Birch bade me back to my game and even set aside his cane and hitched up his trousers in order to crouch beside me.

'And what do we have here?' he asked, indicating the small tin figurines.

'Just a game, sir,' I replied.

'These are your soldiers, are they?' he enquired. 'And which one is the commander?'

'There is no commander, sir,' I said.

He gave a dry laugh. 'Your men need a leader, Haytham. How else will they know the best course of action? How else will they be instilled with a sense of discipline and purpose?'

'I don't know, sir,' I said.

'Here,' said Mr Birch. He reached to remove one of the tiny tin men from the pack, buffed him up on his sleeve and placed him to one side. 'Perhaps we should make this gentleman here the leader – what do you think?'

'If it pleases you, sir.'

'Master Haytham,' smiled Mr Birch, 'this is your game. I am merely an interloper, somebody hoping you can show me how it is played.'

'Yes, sir, then a leader would be fine in the circumstances.'

Suddenly the door to the passageway opened again, and I looked up, this time to see Mr Digweed enter. In the flickering lamplight I saw he and Mr Birch share a look.

'Can your business here wait, Digweed?' said Mr Birch tautly.

'Certainly, sir,' said Mr Digweed, bowing and retreating, the door closing behind him.

'Very good,' continued Mr Birch, his attention returning to the game. 'Then let us move this gentleman here to be the unit's leader, in order to inspire his men to great deeds, to lead them by example and teach them the virtues of order and discipline and loyalty. What do you think, Master Haytham?'

'Yes, sir,' I said obediently.

'Here's something else, Master Haytham,' said Mr Birch, reaching between his feet to move another of the tin soldiers from the pack then placing him next to the nominal commander. 'A leader needs trusted lieutenants, does he not?'

'Yes, sir,' I agreed. There was a long pause, during which I watched Mr Birch take inordinate care placing two more lieutenants next to the leader, a pause that became more and more uncomfortable as the moments passed, until I said, more to break the awkward silence than because I wanted to discuss the inevitable, 'Sir, did you want to speak to me about my sister, sir?'

‘Why, you can see right through me, Master Haytham,’ laughed Mr Birch loudly. ‘Your father is a fine teacher. I see he has taught you guile and cunning – among other things, no doubt.’

I wasn’t sure what he meant so kept quiet.

‘How is weapons training going, may I enquire?’ asked Mr Birch.

‘Very well, sir. I continue to improve each day, so Father says,’ I said proudly.

‘Excellent, excellent. And has your father ever indicated to you the purpose of your training?’ he asked.

‘Father says my *real* training is to begin on the day of my tenth birthday,’ I replied.

‘Well, I wonder what it is that he has to tell you,’ he said, with furrowed brow. ‘You really have no idea? Not even a tantalizing clue?’

‘No, sir, I don’t,’ I said. ‘Only that he will provide me with a path to follow. A creed.’

‘I see. How very exciting. And he’s never given you any indication as to what this “creed” might be?’

‘No, sir.’

‘How fascinating. I’ll wager you cannot wait. And, in the meantime, has your father given you a man’s sword with which to learn your craft, or are you still using the wooden practice batons?’

I bridled. ‘I have my own sword, sir.’

‘I should very much like to see it.’

‘It is kept in the games room, sir, in a safe place that only my father and I have access to.’

‘Only your father and *you*?’ You mean you have access to it, too?’

I coloured, grateful for the dim light in the passageway so that Mr Birch couldn’t see the embarrassment on my face. ‘All I mean is that I know where the sword is kept, sir, not that I would know how to access it,’ I clarified.

‘I see,’ grinned Mr Birch. ‘A secret place, is it? A hidden cavity within the bookcase?’

My face must have said it all. He laughed.

‘Don’t worry, Master Haytham, your secret is safe with me.’

I looked at him. ‘Thank you, sir.’

‘That’s quite all right.’

He stood, reached to pick up his cane, brushed some dirt, real or imaginary, from his trousers and turned towards the door.

‘My sister, sir?’ I said. ‘You never asked me about her.’

He stopped, chuckled softly and reached to ruffle my hair. A gesture I quite liked. Perhaps because it was something my father did, too.

‘Ah, but I don’t need to. You’ve told me everything I need to know, young Master Haytham,’ he said. ‘You know as little about the beautiful Jennifer as I do, and perhaps that is how it must be in the proper way of things. Women should be a mystery to us, don’t you think, Master Haytham?’

I hadn’t the faintest idea what he was talking about but smiled anyway, and breathed a sigh of relief when I once again had the plate-room corridor to myself.

iii

Not long after that talk with Mr Birch I was in another part of the house and making my way towards my bedroom when as I passed Father’s study I heard raised voices from inside: Father and Mr Birch.

The fear of a good hiding meant I stayed too far away to hear what was being said, and I was glad I’d kept my distance, because in the next moment the door to the study was flung open and out hurried Mr Birch. He was in a fury – his anger was plain to see in the colour of his cheeks and blazing eyes – but the sight of me in the hallway brought him up short, even though he remained agitated.

‘I tried, Master Haytham,’ he said, as he gathered himself and began to button his coat ready to leave. ‘I tried to warn him.’

And with that he placed his tricorne on his head and stalked off. My father had appeared at the door of his office and glared after Mr Birch and, though it was clearly an unpleasant encounter, it was grown-up stuff, and I didn’t concern myself with it.

There was more to think about. Just a day or so later came the attack.

iv

It happened on the night before my birthday. The attack, I mean. I was awake, perhaps because I was excited about the next day, but also because I was in the habit of getting up after Edith had left the room to sit on my windowsill and gaze out of my bedroom window. From my vantage point I’d see cats and dogs or even foxes passing across the moon-painted grass. Or, if not watching out for wildlife, then just watching the night, looking at the moon, the watery-grey colour it gave the grass and trees. At first I thought what I was seeing in the distance were fireflies. I’d heard all about fireflies but never seen them. All I knew was that they gathered in clouds and emitted a dull glow. However, I soon realized the light wasn’t a dull glow at all, but in fact was going on, then off, then on again. I was seeing a signal.

My breath caught in my throat. The flashing light seemed to come from close to the old wooden door in the wall, the one where I'd seen Tom that day, and my first thought was that he was trying to contact me. It seems strange now, but not for a second did I assume the signal was meant for anyone but me. I was too busy dragging on a pair of trousers, tucking my nightshirt into the waistband then hooking my braces over my shoulders. I shrugged on a coat. All I could think of was what an awfully splendid adventure I was about to have.

And of course I realize now, looking back, that in the mansion next door Tom must have been another one who liked to sit on his windowsill and watch the nocturnal life in the grounds of his house. And, like me, he must have seen the signal. And perhaps Tom even had the mirror-image thought to mine: that it was me signalling him. And in response did the same as I did: he scrambled from his perch and pulled on some clothes to investigate …

Two new faces had appeared at the house on Queen Anne's Square, a pair of hard-faced former soldiers employed by Father. His explanation was that we needed them because he had received 'information'.

Just that. 'Information' – that's all he'd say. And I wondered then as I wonder now what he meant, and whether it had anything to do with the heated conversation I'd overheard between him and Mr Birch. Whatever it was, I'd seen little of the two soldiers. All I really knew was that one was stationed in the drawing room at the front of the mansion, while the other stayed close to the fire in the servants' hall, supposedly to guard the plate room. Both were easy to avoid as I crept down the steps to below stairs and slid into the silent, moonlit kitchen, which I had never seen so dark and empty and still.

And cold. My breath plumed and straight away I shivered, uncomfortably aware how chilly it was compared to what I'd thought was the meagre heat of my room.

Close by the door was a candle, which I lit and, with my hand cupped over its flame, held to light the way as I let myself out into the stable yard. And if I'd thought it was cold in the kitchen, then, well … outside, it was the kind of cold where it felt as if the world around you was brittle and about to break; cold enough to take my cloudy breath away, to give me second thoughts as I stood there and wondered whether or not I could bear to continue.

One of the horses whinnied and stamped, and for some reason the noise made my mind up, sending me tiptoeing past the kennels to a side wall and through a large arched gate leading into the orchard. I made my way through the bare, spindly apple trees, then was out in the open, painfully aware of the mansion to my right, where I imagined faces at every window: Edith, Betty, Mother and Father all staring out and seeing me out of my room and running amok in the

grounds. Not that I really was running amok, of course, but that's what they'd say; that's what Edith would say as she scolded me and what Father would say when he gave me the cane for my troubles.

But if I was expecting a shout from the house, then none came. Instead I made my way to the perimeter wall, began to run quickly along it towards the door. I was still shivering, but as my excitement grew I wondered if Tom would have brought food for a midnight feast: ham, cake and biscuits. Oh, and a hot toddy would be most welcome, too …

A dog began barking. Thatch, Father's Irish bloodhound, from his kennel in the stable yard. The noise stopped me in my tracks, and I crouched beneath the bare, low-hanging branches of a willow, until it ceased as suddenly as it had started. Later, of course, I'd understand why it stopped so abruptly. But I didn't think anything of it at the time because I had no reason to suspect that Thatch had had his throat cut by an invader. We now think there were five of them altogether who crept up on us with knives and swords. Five men making their way to the mansion, and me in the grounds, oblivious to it all.

But how was I to know? I was a silly boy whose head buzzed with adventure and derring-do, not to mention the thought of ham and cake, and I continued along the perimeter wall, until I came to the gate.

Which was open.

What had I expected? I suppose, for the gate to be shut and for Tom to be on the other side of it. Perhaps one of us would have climbed the wall. Perhaps we planned to trade gossip with the door between us. All I knew was that the gate was open, and I began to get the feeling that something was wrong, and at last it occurred to me that the signalling I'd seen from my bedroom window might not have been meant for me.

'Tom?' I whispered.

There was no sound. The night was completely still: no birds, no animals, nothing. Nervous now, I was about to turn and leave, return to the house and to the safety of my warm bed, when I saw something. A foot. I edged further out of the gate where the passageway was bathed in dirty-white moonlight which gave everything a soft, grubby glow – including the flesh of the boy sprawled on the ground.

He half lay, half sat, propped up against the opposite wall, dressed almost exactly as I was, with a pair of trousers and a nightshirt, only he hadn't bothered to tuck his in and it was twisted around his legs, which lay at strange, unnatural angles on the hard, rutted mud of the walkway.

It was Tom, of course. Tom, whose dead eyes stared sightlessly at me from beneath the brim of his hat, skew-whiff on his head; Tom, with the moonlight

gleaming on blood that had sheeted down his front from the gash at his throat.

My teeth began to chatter. I heard a whimper and realized it was me. A hundred panicked thoughts crowded into my head.

And then things began to happen too quickly for me even to remember the exact order in which they took place, though I think it started with the sound of breaking glass and a scream that came from the house.

Run.

I'm ashamed to admit that the voices, the thoughts jostling in my head, all cried that one word together.

Run.

And I obeyed them. I ran. Only, not in the direction they wanted me to. Was I doing as my father had instructed and listening to my instincts, or ignoring them? I didn't know. All I knew was that though every fibre of my being seemed to want me to flee from what I knew was the most terrible danger, in fact I ran towards it.

Through the stable yard I ran, and burst into the kitchen, hardly pausing to acknowledge the fact that the door hung open on its hinges. From somewhere along the hall I heard more screaming, saw blood on the kitchen floor and stepped through the door towards the stairs, only to see another body. It was one of the soldiers. He lay in the corridor clutching his stomach, eyelids fluttering madly and a line of blood trickling from his mouth as he slid dying to the floor.

As I stepped over him and ran for the stairs, my one thought was to reach my parents. The entrance hall, which was dark, but full of screams and running feet, and the first tendrils of smoke. I tried to get my bearings. From above came yet another scream, and I looked up to see dancing shadows on the balcony, and, briefly, the glitter of steel in the hands of one of our attackers. Meeting him on the landing was one of Father's valets, but the skittering light stopped me from seeing the poor boy's fate. Instead I heard and through my feet *felt* the wet thump of his body as it dropped from the balcony to the wooden floor not far away from me. His assassin gave a howl of triumph, and I could hear running feet as he made his way further along the landing – towards the bedrooms.

'Mother!' I screamed, and ran for the stairs at the same time as I saw my parents' door flung open and my father come surging out to meet the intruder. He wore trousers, and his suspenders were pulled over his naked shoulders, his hair untied and hanging free. In one hand he held a lantern, in the other his blade.

'Haytham!' he called as I reached the top of the stairs. The intruder was between us on the landing. He stopped, turned to look at me, and in the light of Father's lantern I could see him properly for the first time. He wore trousers, a black leather-armour waistcoat and a small half-face mask like the kind worn for

a masked ball. And he was changing direction. Instead of going up against Father, he was charging back along the landing after me, grinning.

'Haytham!' shouted Father again. He pulled away from Mother and began to run down the landing after the intruder. Instantly the gap between them closed, but it wouldn't be enough, and I turned to escape, only to see a second man at the foot of the stairs, sword in hand, blocking my way. He was dressed the same as the first, although I noticed one difference: his ears. They were pointed, and with the mask gave him the look of a hideous, deformed Mr Punch. For a moment I froze, then swung back to see that the grinning man behind me had turned to meet Father, and their swords clashed. Father had left his lantern behind, and it was in the half-dark that they fought. A short, brutal battle punctuated by grunts and the chiming of sword steel. Even in the heat and the danger of the moment I wished it had been light enough to watch him fight properly.

Then it was over and the grinning assassin was grinning no more, dropping his sword, tumbling over the banisters with a scream and hitting the floor beneath. The pointy-eared intruder had been halfway up the stairs but had second thoughts and wheeled around to escape to the entrance hall.

There was a shout from below. Over the banisters I saw a third man, also wearing a mask, who beckoned to the pointy-eared man before both disappeared out of sight beneath the landing. I glanced up and in the low light saw a look pass across my father's face.

'The games room,' he said.

And, in the next instant, before Mother or I could stop him, he'd leapt over the banister to the entrance hall beneath. As he jumped my mother screamed, *'Edward!'* and the anguish in her voice echoed my own thoughts. No. My one, single thought: he's abandoning us.

Why is he abandoning us?

Mother's nightclothes were in disarray around her as she ran along the landing towards where I stood at the top of the stairs; her face was a mask of terror. Behind her came yet another attacker, who appeared from the stairway at the far end of the landing and reached Mother at the same time as she reached me. He grabbed her from behind with one hand while his sword hand swept forward, about to draw the blade across her exposed throat.

I didn't stop to think. I didn't even think about it at all until much later. But in one movement I stepped up, reached, plucked the dead attacker's sword from the stair, raised it above my head and with two hands plunged it into his face before he could cut her throat.

My aim was true and the point of the sword drove through the eyehole of the mask and into the socket. His scream tore a ragged hole in the night as he span away from Mother with the sword momentarily embedded in his eye. Then it was wrenched out as he fell against the banister, toppled for a moment, sank to his knees and pitched forward, dead before his head hit the floor.

Mother ran into my arms and buried her head in my shoulder, even as I grabbed the sword and took her hand to make our way back down the stairs. How many times had Father said to me, on his way to work for the day, 'You're in charge today, Haytham; you look after Mother for me.' Now, I really was.

We reached the foot of the stairs, where a strange quiet seemed to have descended over the house. The entrance hall was empty now and still dark, though lit by an ominous flickering orange glow. The air was beginning to thicken with smoke, but through the haze I saw bodies: the assassin, the valet who was killed earlier … And Edith, who lay with her throat open in a pool of blood.

Mother saw Edith, too, whimpered, and tried to pull me in the direction of the main doors, but the door to the games room was half open, and from inside I could hear the sound of sword fighting. Three men, one of them my father. 'Father needs me,' I said, trying to disentangle myself from Mother, who saw what I was about to do and pulled at me harder, until I snatched my hand away with such force that she collapsed to the floor.

For one strange moment I found myself torn between helping Mother to her feet and apologizing, the sight of her on the floor – on the floor because of me – was so appalling. But then I heard a great cry from inside the games room and it was enough to propel me through the door.

The first thing I saw was that the bookcase compartment was open, and I could see the box holding my sword inside. Otherwise the room was as always, left just as it had been after the last training session, with the covered billiard table moved and space made for me to train; where earlier that day I'd been tutored and scolded by Father.

Where now Father was kneeling, dying.

Standing over him was a man with his sword buried hilt-deep into my father's chest, the blade protruding from his back dripping blood to the wooden floor. Not far away stood the pointy-eared man, who had a large gash down his face. It had taken two of them to defeat Father, and only just at that.

I flew at the killer, who was caught by surprise and without time to retrieve his sword from my father's chest. Instead he span away to avoid my blade, letting go of his sword at the same time as Father dropped to the floor.

Like a fool I continued after the assassin, forgot to protect my flank, and the next thing I saw was a sudden movement out of the corner of my eye as the pointy-eared man danced forward. Whether he meant to do it or mistimed his blow, I'm not sure, but instead of striking me with the blade he clubbed me with the pommel, and my vision went black; my head connected with something it took me a second to realize was the leg of the billiard table, and I was on the floor, dazed, sprawled opposite Father, who lay on his side with the sword handle still protruding from his chest. There was life in his eyes still, just a spark, and his eyelids fluttered momentarily, as if he were focusing, taking me in. For a moment or so we lay opposite one another, two wounded men. His lips were moving. Through a dark cloud of pain and grief I saw his hand reach for me.

'Father –' I said. Then in the next instant the killer had strode over and without pausing bent and pulled his blade from Father's body. Father jerked, his body arched with one last spasm of pain as his lips pulled away from bloodied teeth, and he died.

I felt a boot on my side that pushed me on to my back, and I looked up into the eyes of my father's killer, and now *my* killer, who with a smirk raised his sword two-handed, about to plunge it into me.

If it gave me shame to report that my inner voices had commanded me to run just a few moments before, then it gives me pride to report that now they were calm; that I faced my death with dignity and with the knowledge that I had done my best for my family; with gratitude that I would soon be joining my father.

But of course it was not to be. It's not a ghost who writes these words. Something caught my eye, and it was the tip of a sword that appeared between the killer's legs and in the same instant was driven upwards, opening his torso from the groin up. I've realized since that the direction of the strike had less to do with savagery and more to do with the need to pull my killer away from me, not push him forward. But savage it was, and he screamed, blood splattering as he was split asunder and his guts dropped from the gash to the floor and his lifeless carcass followed suit.

Behind him stood Mr Birch. 'Are you all right, Haytham?' he asked.

'Yes, sir,' I gasped.

'Good show,' he said, then spun with his sword up to intercept the pointy-eared man, who came at him with his blade flashing.

I pulled myself to my knees, grabbed a fallen sword and stood, ready to join Mr Birch, who had driven the pointy-eared man back to the door of the games room when suddenly the attacker saw something – something out of sight behind the door – and danced to one side. In the next instant Mr Birch reared back and

held out a hand to prevent me coming forward, while at the doorway the pointy-eared man had reappeared. Only this time he had a hostage. Not my mother, as I at first feared. It was Jenny.

'Get back,' snarled Pointy Ears. Jenny snivelled, and her eyes were wide as the blade pressed into her throat.

Can I admit – can I admit that at that moment I cared far more for avenging my father's death than I did for protecting Jenny?

'Stay there,' repeated Pointy Ears man, pulling Jenny back. The hem of her nightdress was caught around her ankles and her heels dragged on the floor. Suddenly they were joined by another masked man who brandished a flaming torch. The entrance hall was almost full of smoke now. I could see flames coming from another part of the house, licking at the doors to the drawing room. The man with the torch darted to the drapes, put his flame to them, and more of our house began to burn around us, Mr Birch and I powerless to stop it.

I saw my mother out of the corner of my eye and thanked God she was all right. Jenny was another matter, though. As she was dragged towards the door of the mansion, her eyes were fixed on me and Mr Birch as though we were her last hopes. The torch-bearing attacker came to join his colleague, hauled the door open and darted out towards a carriage I could see on the street outside.

For a moment I thought they might let Jenny go, but no. She began to scream as she was dragged towards the carriage and bundled in, and she was still screaming as a third masked man in the driver's seat shook the reins, wielded his crop and the carriage rattled off into the night, leaving us to escape from our burning house and drag our dead from the clutches of the flames.

10 December 1735

i

Even though we buried Father today, the first thing I thought about when I awoke this morning didn't involve him or his funeral, it was about the plate room at Queen Anne's Square.

They hadn't tried to enter it. Father had employed the two soldiers because he was worried about a robbery, but our attackers had made their way upstairs without even bothering to try to raid the plate room.

Because they were after Jenny, that was why. And killing Father? Was that part of the plan?

This was what I thought as I awoke to a room that was freezing – which isn't unusual, that it should be freezing. An everyday occurrence, in fact. Just that today's room was *especially* cold. The kind of cold that sets your teeth on edge; that reaches into your bones. I glanced over to the hearth, wondering why there wasn't more heat from the fire, only to see that it was unlit and the grate grey and dusty with ash.

I clambered out of bed and went to where there was a thick layer of ice on the inside of the window, preventing me from seeing out. Gasping with cold, I dressed, left my room and was struck by how quiet the house seemed. Creeping all the way downstairs, I found Betty's room, knocked softly, then a little harder. When she didn't answer, I stood debating what to do, a little concern for her gnawing at the insides of my stomach. And when there was still no answer I knelt to look through the keyhole, praying I wouldn't see anything I shouldn't.

She lay asleep in one of the two beds in her room. The other one was empty and neatly made up, although there was a pair of what looked like men's boots at the foot of it, with a strip of silver at the heel. My gaze went back to Betty, and for a moment I watched as the blanket covering her rose and fell, and then decided to let her sleep on, and straightened.

I ambled along to the kitchen, where Mrs Searle started a little as I entered, looked me up and down with a slightly disapproving gaze then returned to her work at the chopping board. It wasn't that Mrs Searle and I had fallen out, just

that Mrs Searle regarded everybody with suspicion, and since the attack even more so.

‘She’s not one of life’s most forgiving sorts,’ Betty had said to me one afternoon. That was another thing that had changed since the attack: Betty had become a lot more candid, and every now and then would drop hints about how she *really* felt about things. I had never realized that she and Mrs Searle didn’t see eye to eye, for example, nor had I any idea that Betty regarded Mr Birch with suspicion. She did though: ‘I don’t know why he’s making decisions on behalf of the Kenways,’ she had muttered darkly yesterday. ‘He’s not a member of the family. Doubt he ever will be.’

Somehow, knowing that Betty didn’t think much of Mrs Searle made the housekeeper less forbidding in my eyes, and while before I would have thought twice about wandering into the kitchen unannounced and requesting food, I now had no such qualms.

‘Good morning, Mrs Searle,’ I said.

She gave a small curtsy. The kitchen was cold, just her in it. At Queen Anne’s Square, Mrs Searle had at least three helpers, not to mention sundry other staff who flitted in and out through the great double doors of the kitchen. But that was before the attack, when we had a full complement, and there’s nothing like an invasion of sword-wielding masked men for driving the servants away. Most hadn’t even returned the following day.

Now there was just Mrs Searle, Betty, Mr Digweed, a chambermaid called Emily, and Miss Davy, who was mother’s lady’s maid. They were the last of the staff who looked after the Kenways. Or the remaining Kenways, I should say. Just me and Mother left now.

When I left the kitchen it was with a piece of cake wrapped in cloth handed to me with a sour look by Mrs Searle, who no doubt disapproved of me wandering about the house so early in the morning, scavenging for food ahead of the breakfast she was in the process of preparing. I like Mrs Searle, and since she’s one of the few members of staff to have stayed with us after that terrible night I like her even more, but even so. There are other things to worry about now. Father’s funeral. And Mother, of course.

And then I found myself in the entrance hall, looking at the inside of the front door, and before I knew it I was opening the door, and without thinking – without thinking too much, anyway – letting myself out on to the steps and out into a world clouded with frost.

‘Now, what in the blazes do you plan to do on such a cold morning, Master Haytham?’

A carriage had just drawn up outside the house, and at the window was Mr Birch. He wore a hat that was heavier than usual, and a scarf pulled up over his nose so that, at first glance, he looked like a highwayman.

‘Just looking, sir,’ I said, from the steps.

He pulled his scarf down, trying to smile. Before when he’d smiled it had set his eyes twinkling, now it was like the dwindling, cooling ashes of the fire, trying but unable to generate any warmth, as strained and tired as his voice when he spoke. ‘I think perhaps I know what you’re looking for, Master Haytham.’

‘What’s that, sir?’

‘The way home?’

I thought about it and realized he was right. The trouble was, I had lived the first ten years of my life being shepherded around by parents and the nursemaids. Though I knew that Queen Anne’s Square was near, and even within walking distance, I had no idea how to get there.

‘And were you planning on a visit?’ he asked.

I shrugged, but the truth of it was that, yes, I had pictured myself in the shell of my old home. In the games room there. I’d pictured myself retrieving …

‘Your sword?’

I nodded.

‘It’s too dangerous to go in the house, I’m afraid. Would you like to take a trip over there anyway? You can see it, at least. Come inside, it’s as cold as a greyhound’s nostril out there.’

And I saw no reason not to, especially when he produced a hat and a cape from within the depths of the carriage.

When we pulled up at the house some moments later it didn’t look at all as I had imagined it. No, it was far, far worse. As though a giant God-like fist had pounded into it from above, smashing through the roof and the floors beneath, gouging a huge, ragged hole into the house. It wasn’t so much a house now as a cutaway of one.

Through broken windows we could see into the entrance hall and up – through smashed floors to the hallway three flights up, all of them blackened with soot. I could see furniture that I recognized, blackened and charred, burnt portraits hanging lopsided on the walls.

‘I’m sorry – it really is too dangerous to go inside, Master Haytham,’ said Mr Birch.

After a moment he led me back into the carriage, tapped the ceiling twice with his cane, and we pulled away.

‘However,’ said Mr Birch, ‘I took the liberty of retrieving your sword yesterday,’ and reaching beneath his seat he produced the box. It, too, was dusty with soot, but when he pulled it to his lap and opened the lid, the sword lay inside, as gleaming as it had been the day Father gave it to me.

‘Thank you, Mr Birch’ was all I could say, as he closed the box and placed it on the seat between us.

‘It’s a handsome sword, Haytham. I’ve no doubt you’ll treasure it.’

‘I will, sir.’

‘And when, I wonder, will it first taste blood?’

‘I don’t know, sir.’

There was a pause. Mr Birch clasped his cane between his knees.

‘The night of the attack, you killed a man,’ he said, turning his head to look out of the window. We passed houses that were only just visible, floating through a haze of smoke and freezing air. It was still early. The streets were quiet. ‘How did that feel, Haytham?’

‘I was protecting Mother,’ I said.

‘That was the only possible option, Haytham,’ he agreed, nodding, ‘and you did the right thing. Don’t for a moment think otherwise. But it being the only option doesn’t change the fact that it’s no small matter to kill a man. For anybody. Not for your father. Not for me. But especially not for a boy of such tender years.’

‘I felt no sadness at what I did. I just acted.’

‘And have you thought about it since?’

‘No, sir. I’ve thought only of Father, and Mother.’

‘And Jenny …?’ said Mr Birch.

‘Oh. Yes, sir.’

There was a pause, and when he next spoke his voice was flat and solemn. ‘We need to find her, Haytham,’ he said.

I kept quiet.

‘I intend to leave for Europe where we believe she is being held.’

‘How do you know she is in Europe, sir?’

‘Haytham, I am a member of an influential and important organization. A kind of club, or society. One of the many advantages to membership is that we have eyes and ears everywhere.’

‘What is it called, sir?’ I asked.

‘The Templars, Master Haytham. I am a Templar knight.’

‘A knight?’ I said, looking at him sharply.

He gave a short laugh. ‘Perhaps not exactly the kind of knight you’re thinking of, Haytham, a relic of the Middle Ages, but our ideals remain the same. Just as

our forebears set out to spread peace across the Holy Land centuries ago, so we are the unseen power that helps to maintain peace and order in our time.' He waved his hand at the window, where the streets were busier now. 'All of this, Haytham, it requires structure and discipline, and structure and discipline require an example to follow. The Knights Templar *are* that example.'

My head span. 'And where do you meet? What do you do? Do you have armour?'

'Later, Haytham. Later, I'll tell you more.'

'Was Father a member, though? Was he a knight?' My heart leapt. 'Was he training *me* to become one?'

'No, Master Haytham, he was not, and I'm afraid that as far as I'm aware he was merely training you in swordsmanship in order that … well, the fact that your mother lives proves the worth of your lessons. No, my relationship with your father was not built on my membership of the Order. I'm pleased to say that I was employed by him for my skill at property management rather than any hidden connections. Nevertheless, he knew that I was a knight. After all, the Templars have powerful and wealthy connections, and these could sometimes be of use in our business. Your father may not have been a member, but he was shrewd enough to see the worth of the connections: a friendly word, the passing on of useful information' – he took a deep breath – 'one of which was the tip-off about the attack at Queen Anne's Square. I told him, of course. I asked him why it might be that he had been targeted, but he scoffed at the very idea – disingenuously, perhaps. We clashed over it, Haytham. Voices were raised, but I only wish now I'd been even more insistent.'

'Was that the argument I heard?' I asked.

He looked sideways at me. 'So you did hear, did you? Not eavesdropping, I hope?'

The tone in his voice made me more than thankful I hadn't been. 'No, Mr Birch, sir, I heard raised voices, and that was all.'

He looked hard at me. Satisfied I was telling the truth, he faced forward. 'Your father was as stubborn as he was inscrutable.'

'But he didn't ignore the warning, sir. He employed the soldiers, after all.'

Mr Birch sighed. 'Your father didn't take the threat seriously, and would have done nothing. When he wouldn't listen to me, I took the step of informing your mother. It was at her insistence that he employed the soldiers. I wish now I had substituted the men for men taken from our ranks. They would not have been so easily overwhelmed. All I can do now is try to find his daughter for him and punish those responsible. To do that I need to know why – what was the purpose

of the attack? Tell me, what do you know of him before he settled in London, Master Haytham?'

'Nothing, sir,' I replied.

He gave a dry chuckle. 'Well, that makes two of us. More than two of us, in fact. Your mother knows next to nothing also.'

'And Jenny, sir?'

'Ah, the equally inscrutable Jenny. As frustrating as she was beautiful, as inscrutable as she was adorable.'

' "Was", sir?'

'A turn of phrase, Master Haytham – I hope with all my heart at least. I remain hopeful that Jenny is safe in the hands of her captors, of use to them only if she is alive.'

'You think she has been taken for a ransom?'

'Your father was very rich. Your family might well have been targeted for your wealth, and your father's death unplanned. It's certainly possible. We have men looking into that possibility now. Equally, the mission may have been to assassinate your father, and we have men looking into that possibility also – well, me, because of course I knew him well, and would know if he had any enemies: enemies with the wherewithal to stage such an attack, I mean, rather than disgruntled tenants – and I came up with not a single possibility, which leads me to believe that the object may have been to settle a grudge. If so then it's a long-standing grudge, something that relates to his time before London. Jenny, being the only one who knew him before London, may have had answers, but whatever she knew she has taken into the hands of her captors. Either way, Haytham, we need to locate her.'

There was something about the way he said 'we'.

'As I say, it is thought she will have been taken somewhere in Europe, so Europe is where we will conduct our search for her. And by "we', I mean you and me, Haytham.'

I started. 'Sir?' I said, hardly able to believe my ears.

'That's right,' he said. 'You shall be coming with me.'

'Mother needs me, sir. I can't leave her here.'

Mr Birch looked at me again, in his eyes neither kindliness not malice. 'Haytham,' he said, 'I'm afraid the decision is not yours to make.'

'It is for Mother to make,' I insisted.

'Well, quite.'

'What do you mean, sir?'

He sighed. 'I mean, have you spoken to your mother since the night of the attack?'

‘She’s been too distressed to see anyone but Miss Davy or Emily. She’s stayed in her room, and Miss Davy says I’m to be summoned when she can see me.’

‘When you do see her, you will find her changed.’

‘Sir?’

‘On the night of the attack, Tessa saw her husband die and her little boy kill a man. These things will have had a profound effect on her, Haytham; she may not be the person you remember.’

‘All the more reason she needs me.’

‘Maybe what she needs is to get well, Haytham – possibly with as few reminders of that terrible night around her as possible.’

‘I understand, sir,’ I said.

‘I’m sorry if that comes as a shock, Haytham.’ He frowned. ‘And I may well be wrong, of course, but I’ve been dealing with your father’s business affairs since his death, and we’ve been making arrangements with your mother, I’ve had the opportunity of seeing her first-hand, and I don’t think I’m wrong. Not this time.’

iii

Mother called for me shortly before the funeral.

When Betty, who had been full of red-faced apologies for what she called ‘her little lie-in’, told me, my first thought was that she had changed her mind about me going to Europe with Mr Birch, but I was wrong. Darting along to her room, I knocked and only just heard her tell me to come in – her voice so weak and reedy now, not at all how it used to be, when it was soft but commanding. Inside, she was sitting by the window, and Miss Davy was fussing at the curtains; even though it was daytime it was hardly bright outside but, nevertheless, Mother was waving her hand in front of her, as if she were being bothered by an angry bird, rather than just some greying rays of winter sunlight. At last Miss Davy finished to Mother’s satisfaction and with a weary smile indicated me to a seat.

Mother turned her head towards me, very slowly, looked at me and forced a smile. The attack had exacted a terrible toll on her. It was as though all the life had been leeched out of her; as though she had lost the light she always had, whether she was smiling or cross or, as Father always said, wearing her heart on her sleeve. Now the smile slowly slid from her lips, which settled back into a blank frown, as though she’d tried but no longer had the strength to keep up any pretence.

‘You know I’m not going to the funeral, Haytham?’ she said blankly.

‘Yes, Mother.’

‘I’m sorry. I’m sorry, Haytham, I really am, but I’m not strong enough.’

She never usually called me Haytham. She called me ‘darling’.

‘Yes, Mother,’ I said, knowing that she was – she was strong enough. *‘Your Mother has more pluck than any man I’ve ever met, Haytham,’* Father used to say.

They had met shortly after they moved to London, and she had pursued him – ‘like a lioness in pursuit of her prey’, Father had joked, ‘a sight as blood-curdling as it was awe-inspiring’, and earned himself a clout for that particular joke, the kind of joke you thought might have had an element of truth to it.

She didn’t like to talk about her family. ‘Well to do’ was all I knew. And Jenny had hinted once that they had disowned her because of her association with Father. Why, of course, I never found out. On the odd occasion I’d pestered Mother about Father’s life before London, she’d smiled mysteriously. He’d tell me when he was ready. Sitting in her room, I realized that at least part of the grief I felt was the pain of knowing that I’d never hear whatever it was Father was planning to tell me on my birthday. Although it’s just a tiny part of the grief, I should make clear – insignificant compared to the grief of losing Father and the pain of seeing Mother like this. So … *reduced*. So lacking in that pluck Father spoke of.

Perhaps it had turned out that the source of her strength was him. Perhaps the carnage of that terrible evening had simply been too much for her to take. They say it happens to soldiers. They get ‘soldier’s heart’ and become shadows of their former selves. The bloodshed changes them somehow. Was that the case with Mother? I wondered.

‘I’m sorry, Haytham,’ she added.

‘It’s all right, Mother.’

‘No – I mean, you are to go to Europe with Mr Birch.’

‘But I’m needed here, with you. To look after you.’

She gave an airy laugh: ‘Mama’s little soldier, uh?’, and fixed me with a strange, searching look. I knew exactly where her mind was going. Back to what had happened on the stairs. She was seeing me thrust a blade into the eye socket of the masked attacker.

And then she tore her eyes away, leaving me feeling almost breathless with the raw emotion of her gaze.

‘I have Miss Davy and Emily to look after me, Haytham. When the repairs are made to Queen Anne’s Square we’ll be able to move back and I can employ more staff. No, it is me who should be looking after you, and I have appointed Mr Birch the family comptroller and your guardian, so that you can be looked after properly. It’s what your father would have wanted.’

She looked at the curtain quizzically, as if she was trying to recall why it was drawn. ‘I understand Mr Birch was going to speak to you about leaving for Europe straight away.’

‘He did, yes, but –’

‘Good.’ She regarded me. Again, there was something discomfiting about the look; she was no longer the mother I knew, I realized. Or was I no longer the son she knew?

‘It’s for the best, Haytham.’

‘But, Mother …’

She looked at me, then away again quickly.

‘You’re going, and that’s the end of it,’ she said firmly, her stare returning to the curtains. My eyes went to Miss Davy as though looking for assistance, but I found none; in return she gave me a sympathetic smile, a raise of the eyebrows, an expression that said, ‘I’m sorry, Haytham, there’s nothing I can do, her mind is made up,’ and there was silence in the room, no sound apart from the clip-clopping of hooves from outside, from a world that carried on oblivious to the fact that mine was being taken apart.

‘You are dismissed, Haytham,’ Mother said, with a wave of her hand.

Before – before the attack, I mean – she had never used to ‘summon’ me. Or ‘dismiss’ me. Before, she had never let me leave her side without at least a kiss on the cheek, and she’d told me she loved me, at least once a day.

As I stood, it occurred to me that she hadn’t said anything about what had happened on the stairs that night. She had never thanked me for saving her life. At the door I paused and turned to look at her, and wondered whether she wished the outcome had been different.

iv

Mr Birch accompanied me to the funeral, a small, informal service at the same chapel we had used for Edith, with almost the same number in attendance: the household, Old Mr Fayling, and a few members of staff from Father’s work, whom Mr Birch spoke to afterwards. He introduced me to one of them, Mr Simpkin, a man I judged to be in his mid-thirties, who I was told would be handling the family’s affairs. He bowed a little and gave me a look I’m coming to recognize as a mix of awkwardness and sympathy, each struggling to find adequate expression.

‘I will be dealing with your mother while you are in Europe, Master Haytham,’ he assured me.

It hit me that I really was going; that I had no choice, no say whatsoever in the matter. Well, I do have a choice, I suppose – I could run away. Not that running away seems like any kind of choice.

We took carriages home. Trooping into the house, I caught sight of Betty, who looked at me and gave me a weak smile. The news about me was spreading, so it seemed. When I asked her what she planned to do, she told me that Mr Digweed had found her alternative employment. When she looked at me her eyes shone with tears, and when she left the room I sat at my desk to write my journal with a heavy heart.

11 December 1735

i

We depart for Europe tomorrow morning. It strikes me how few preparations are needed. It is as though the fire had already severed all my ties with my old life. What few things I had left were only enough to fill two trunks, which were taken away this morning. Today I am to write letters, and also to see Mr Birch in order to tell him about something that occurred last night, after I'd gone to bed.

I was almost asleep when I heard a soft knocking at the door, sat up and said, 'Come in,' fully expecting it to be Betty.

It wasn't. I saw the figure of a girl, who stepped quickly into the room and shut the door behind her. She raised a candle so I could see her face and the finger she held to her lips. It was Emily, blonde-haired Emily, the chambermaid.

'Master Haytham,' she said, 'I have something I need to tell you, which has been preying on my mind, sir.'

'Of course,' I said, hoping my voice wouldn't betray the fact that I felt suddenly very young and vulnerable.

'I know the maid of the Barretts,' she said quickly. 'Violet, who was one of those who came out of their houses that night. She was close to the carriage they put your sister in, sir. As they bundled Miss Jenny past her and the carriage, Miss Jenny caught Violet's eye and told her something quickly, which Violet has told me.'

'What was it?' I said.

'It was very quick, sir, and there was plenty of noise, and before she could say any more they bundled her into the carriage, but what Violet thinks she heard was "Traitor". Next day, a man paid Violet a visit, a man with a West Country accent, or so she said, who wanted to know what she'd heard, but Violet said she'd heard nothing, even when the gentleman threatened her. He showed her an evil-looking knife, sir, out of his belt, but even then she said nothing.'

'But she told you?'

'Violet's my sister, sir. She worries for me.'

'Have you told anyone else?'

‘No, sir.’

‘I shall tell Mr Birch in the morning,’ I said.

‘But, sir …’

‘What?’

‘What if the traitor *is* Mr Birch?’

I gave a short laugh and shook my head. ‘It isn’t possible. He saved my life. He was there fighting the …’ Something struck me. ‘There is someone who *wasn’t* there, though.’

ii

Of course I sent word to Mr Birch at the first opportunity this morning, and he reached the same conclusion I had.

An hour later another man arrived, who was shown into the study. He was about the same age my father had been and had a craggy face, scars and the cold, staring eyes of some species of sea-life. He was taller than Mr Birch, and broader, and seemed to fill the room with his presence. A *dark* presence. And he looked at me. Down his nose at me. Down his wrinkled-with-disdain nose at me.

‘This is Mr Braddock,’ said Mr Birch, as I stood fixed into place by the newcomer’s glare. ‘He is also a Templar. He has my total and utmost trust, Haytham.’ He cleared his throat, and said loudly, ‘And a manner sometimes at odds with what I know to be in his heart.’

Mr Braddock snorted, and shot him a withering look.

‘Now, Edward,’ chided Birch. ‘Haytham, Mr Braddock will be in charge of finding the traitor.’

‘Thank you, sir,’ I said.

Mr Braddock looked me over then spoke to Mr Birch. ‘This Digweed,’ he said, ‘perhaps you can show me his quarters.’

When I moved to follow them, Mr Braddock glared at Mr Birch, who nodded almost imperceptibly then turned to me, smiling, with a look in his eyes that begged my forbearance.

‘Haytham,’ he said, ‘perhaps you should attend to other matters. Your preparations for leaving, perhaps,’ and I was compelled to return to my room, where I surveyed my already packed cases then retrieved my journal, in which to write the events of the day. Moments ago, Mr Birch came to me with the news: Digweed has escaped, he told me, his face grave. However, they will find him, he assured me. The Templars always catch their man and, in the meantime, nothing changes. We still depart for Europe.

It strikes me this will be my last entry at home here in London. These are the last words of my old life, before my new one begins.

Part Two

1747, Twelve Years Later

10 June 1747

i

I watched the traitor today as he moved around the bazaar. Wearing a plumed hat, colourful buckles and garters, he strutted from stall to stall and twinkled in the bright, white Spanish sun. With some of the stallholders he joked and laughed; with others he exchanged cross words. He was neither friend nor despot, it seemed, and indeed, the impression I formed of him, albeit one I formed at a distance, was of a fair man, benevolent even. But then again it's not those people he was betraying. It is his Order. It is us.

His guards stayed with him during his rounds, and they were diligent men, I could tell. Their eyes never stopped moving around the market, and when one of the stallholders gave him a hearty clap on the back and pressed on him a gift of bread from his stall, he waved to the taller of the two guards, who took it with his left hand, keeping his sword hand free. Good. Good man. Templar-trained.

Moments later a small boy darted out from the crowds, and straight away my eyes went to the guards, saw them tense, assess the danger and then …

Relax?

Laugh at themselves for being jumpy?

No. They stayed tense. Stayed watchful, because they're not fools and they knew the boy might have been a decoy.

They were good men. I wondered if they had been corrupted by the teachings of their employer, a man who pledged allegiance to one cause while promoting the ideals of another. I hoped not, because I'd already decided to let them live. And if it appears to be somewhat convenient that I've decided to let them live, and that maybe the truth has more to do with my apprehension of going into combat with two such competent men, then that appearance is false. They may be vigilant; undoubtedly they would be expert swordsmen; they would be skilled in the business of death.

But then, I am vigilant. I am an expert swordsman. And I am skilled in the business of death. I have a natural aptitude for it. Although, unlike theology, philosophy, classics and my languages, particularly Spanish, which is so good

that I'm able to pass as a Spaniard here in Altea, albeit a somewhat reticent one, I take no pleasure in my skill at death. Simply, I am good at it.

Perhaps if my target was Digweed – perhaps then I might take some small measure of gratification from his death at my hands. But it is not.

ii

For the five years after we left London, Reginald and I scoured Europe, moving from country to country in a travelling caravan of staff and fellow Knights who shifted around us, drifting in and out of our lives, we two the only constants as we moved from one country to the next, sometimes picking up the trail of a group of Turkish slavers who were believed to be holding Jenny, and occasionally acting on information concerning Digweed, which Braddock would attend to, riding off for months on end but always returning empty-handed.

Reginald was my tutor, and in that respect he had similarities to Father; first in that he tended to sneer at almost anything from books, constantly asserting that there existed a higher, more advanced learning than could be found in dusty old schoolbooks, which I later came to know as Templar learning; and second, in that he insisted I think for myself.

Where they differed was that my Father would ask me to make up my own mind. Reginald, I came to learn, viewed the world in more absolute terms. With Father I sometimes felt as if the thinking was enough – that the thinking was a means unto itself and the conclusion I reached somehow less important than the journey. With Father, facts, and, looking back over past journals I realize even the entire concept of *truth*, could feel like shifting, mutable properties.

There was no such ambiguity with Reginald, though, and in the early years when I might say otherwise, he'd smile at me and tell me he could hear my father in me. He'd tell me how my father had been a great man and wise in many ways, and quite the best swordsman he had ever known, but his attitude to learning was not as scholarly as it might have been.

Does it shame me to admit that over time I came to prefer Reginald's way, the stricter Templar way? Though he was always good-tempered, quick with a joke and smile, he lacked the natural joy, even mischief, of Father. He was always buttoned and neat, for one thing, and he was fanatical about punctuality; he insisted that things be orderly at all times. And yet, almost despite myself there was something fixed about Reginald, some certainty, both inner and outer, that came to appeal to me more and more as the years passed.

One day I realized why. It was the absence of doubt – and with it confusion, indecision, uncertainty. This feeling – this feeling of 'knowing' that Reginald

imbued in me – was my guide from boyhood to adulthood. I never forgot my father's teachings; on the contrary, he would have been proud of me because I *questioned* his ideals. In doing so I adopted new ones.

We never found Jenny. Over the years, I'd mellowed towards her memory. Reading back over my journals, the young me could not have cared less about her, something I'm somewhat ashamed of, because I'm a grown man now, and I see things in different terms. Not that my youthful antipathy towards her did anything to hinder the hunt for her, of course. In that mission, Mr Birch had more than enough zeal for the two of us. But it wasn't enough. The funds we received from Mr Simpkin in London were handsome, but they weren't without end. We found a chateau in France, hidden near Troyes, in the Landes of Champagne, in which to make our base, where Mr Birch continued my apprenticeship, sponsoring my admittance as an Adept and then, three years ago, as a fully fledged member of the Order.

Weeks would go by with no mention of either Jenny or Digweed; then months. We were involved in other Templar activities. The War of the Austrian Succession had seemed to gobble the whole of Europe into its greedy maw, and we were needed to help protect Templar interests. My 'aptitude', my skill at death, became apparent, and Reginald was quick to see its benefits. The first to die – not my first 'kill', of course; my first assassination, I should say – was a greedy merchant in Liverpool. My second was an Austrian prince.

After the killing of the merchant, two years ago, I returned to London, only to find that building work was continuing at Queen Anne's Square, and Mother … Mother was too tired to see me that day, and would be the following day as well. 'Is she too tired to answer my letters, too?' I asked Mrs Davy, who apologized and averted her gaze. Afterwards I rode to Herefordshire, hoping to locate Digweed's family, to no avail. The traitor in our household was never to be found, it seemed – or *is* never to be found, I should say.

But then, the fire of vengeance in my gut burns less fiercely these days, perhaps simply because I've grown; perhaps because of what Reginald has taught me about control of oneself, mastery of one's own emotions.

Even so, dim it may be, but it continues to burn within me.

iii

The *hostale* owner's wife has just been to visit, throwing a quick look down the steps before she closed the door behind her. A messenger arrived while I was out, she said, and handed his missive to me with a lascivious look that I might

have been tempted to act upon if I hadn’t had other things on my mind. The events of last night, for example.

So instead I ushered her out of my room and sat down to decode the message. It told me that as soon as I was finished in Altea, I was to travel not home, to France, but to Prague, where I would meet Reginald in the cellar rooms of the house in Celetna Lane, the Templar headquarters. He has an urgent matter to discuss with me.

In the meantime, I have my cheese. Tonight, the traitor meets his end.

11 June 1747

i

It is done. The kill, I mean. And though it was not without its complications, the execution was clean insofar as he is dead and I remain undetected, and for that I can allow myself to take a measure of satisfaction in having completed my task.

His name was Juan Vedomir, and supposedly his job was to protect our interests in Altea. That he had used the opportunity to build an empire of his own was tolerated; the information we had was that he controlled the port and market with a benign hand, and certainly on the evidence of earlier that day he seemed to enjoy some support, even if the constant presence of his guards proved that wasn't always the case.

Was he *too* benign, though? Reginald thought so, had investigated, and eventually found that Vedomir's abandonment of Templar ideologies was so complete as to amount to treachery. We are intolerant of traitors in the Order. I was despatched to Altea. I watched him. And, last night, I took my cheese and left my *hostale* for the last time, making my way along cobbled streets to his villa.

'Yes?' said the guard who opened his door.

'I have cheese,' I said.

'I can smell it from here,' he replied.

'I hope to convince Señor Vedomir to allow me to trade at the bazaar.'

His nose wrinkled some more. 'Señor Vedomir is in the business of attracting patrons to the market, not driving them away.'

'Perhaps those with a more refined palate might disagree, señor?'

The guard squinted. 'Your accent. Where are you from?'

He was the first to question my Spanish citizenship. 'Originally from the Republic of Genoa,' I said, smiling, 'where cheese is one of our finest exports.'

'Your cheese will have to go a long way to beat Varela's cheese.'

I continued to smile. 'I am confident that it does. I am confident that Señor Vedomir will think so.'

He looked doubtful but stood aside and let me into a wide entrance hall, which though the night was warm, was cool, almost cold, as well as being sparse, with just two chairs and a table, on which were some cards. I glanced at them. A game of piquet, I was pleased to see, because piquet's a two-player game, which meant there were no more guards hiding in the woodwork.

The first guard indicated for me to place the wrapped cheese on the card table, and I did as I was told. The second man stood back, one hand on the hilt of his sword as his partner checked me for weapons, patting my clothes thoroughly and next searching the bag I wore around my shoulder, in which were a few coins and my journal, but nothing more. I had no blade.

'He's not armed,' said the first guard, and the second man nodded. 'The first guard indicated my cheese. 'You want Señor Vedomir to taste this, I take it?'

I nodded enthusiastically.

'Perhaps I should taste it first?' said the first guard, watching me closely.

'I had hoped to save it all for Señor Vedomir,' I replied with an obsequious smile.

The guard gave a snort. 'You have more than enough. Perhaps *you* should taste it.'

I began to protest. 'But I had hoped to save it for –'

He put his hand to the hilt of his sword. *'Taste it,'* he insisted.

I nodded. 'Of course, señor,' I said, and unwrapped a piece, picked off a chunk and ate it. Next he indicated I should try another piece, which I did, making a face to show how heavenly it tasted. 'And now that it's been opened,' I said, proffering the wrapping, 'you might as well have a taste.'

The two guards exchanged a look, then at last the first smiled, went to a thick wooden door at the end of the passageway, knocked and entered. Then they appeared again and beckoned me forward, into Vedomir's chamber.

Inside, it was dark and heavily perfumed. Silk billowed gently on the low ceiling as we entered. Vedomir sat with his back to us, his long black hair loose, wearing a nightshirt and writing by the light of a candle at his desk.

'Would you have me stay, Señor Vedomir?' asked the guard.

Vedomir didn't turn around. 'I take it our guest isn't armed?'

'No, señor,' said the guard, 'although the smell of his cheese is enough to fell an army.'

'To me the scent is a perfume, Cristian,' laughed Vedomir. 'Please show our guest to a seat, and I shall be over in a moment.'

I sat on a low stool by an empty hearth as he blotted the book then came over, stopping to pick up a small knife from a side table as he came.

‘Cheese, then?’ His smile split a thin moustache as he lifted his nightshirt to sit on another low stool, opposite.

‘Yes, señor,’ I said.

He looked at me. ‘Oh? I was told you were from the Republic of Genoa, but I can hear from your voice that you are English.’

I started with shock, but the big grin he wore told me I had nothing to worry about. Not yet at least. ‘And there I was, thinking me so clever to hide my nationality all this time,’ I said, impressed, ‘but you have found me out, señor.’

‘And the first to do so, evidently, which is why your head is still on your shoulders. Our two countries are at war, are they not?’

‘The whole of Europe is at war, señor. I sometimes wonder if anybody knows who is fighting whom.’

Vedomir chuckled and his eyes danced. ‘You’re being disingenuous, my friend. I think we all know your King George’s allegiances, as well as his ambitions. Your British navy is said to think itself the best in the world. The French, the Spanish – not to mention the Swedes – disagree. An Englishman in Spain takes his life in his hands.’

‘Should I be concerned for my safety now, señor?’

‘With me?’ He spread his hands and gave a crooked, ironic smile. ‘I like to think I rise above the petty concerns of kings, my friend.’

‘Then who do you serve, señor?’

‘Why, the people of the town, of course.’

‘And to whom do you pledge allegiance if not to King Ferdinand?’

‘To a higher power, señor,’ smiled Vedomir, closing the subject firmly and turning his attention to the wrappings of cheese I’d placed by the hearth. ‘Now,’ he went on, you’ll have to forgive my confusion. This cheese. Is it from the Republic of Genoa or is it English cheese?’

‘It is *my* cheese, señor. My cheeses are the best wherever one plants one’s flag.’

‘Good enough to usurp Varela?’

‘Perhaps to trade alongside him?’

‘And what then? Then I have an unhappy Varela.’

‘Yes, señor.’

‘Such a state of affairs might be of no concern to you, señor, but these are the matters that vex me daily. Now, let me taste this cheese before it melts, eh?’

Pretending to feel the heat, I loosened my neck scarf then took it off. Surreptitiously, I reached into my shoulder bag and palmed a doubloon. When he turned his attention to the cheese I dropped the doubloon into the scarf.

The knife glittered in the candlelight as Vedomir cut off a chunk of the first cheese, holding the piece with his thumb and sniffing at it – hardly necessary; I could smell it from where I sat – then popped it into his mouth. He ate thoughtfully, looked at me, then cut off a second chunk.

'Hm,' he said, after some moments. 'You are wrong, señor, this is not superior to Varela's cheese. It is in fact *exactly the same* as Varela's cheese.' His smile had faded and his face had darkened. I realized I had been found out. 'In fact, this *is* Varela's cheese.'

His mouth was opening to shout for help as I dropped the doubloon into the scarf, twirled the silk into a garrotte with a flick of my wrists and leapt forward with crossed arms, dropping it over his head and around his neck.

His knife hand arced up, but he was too slow and caught unawares, and the knife thrashed wildly at the silk above our heads as I secured my *rumal*, the coin pressing in on his windpipe, cutting off any noise. Holding the garrotte with one hand, I disarmed him, tossed the knife to a cushion then used both hands to tighten the *rumal*.

'My name is Haytham Kenway,' I said dispassionately, leaning forward to look into his wide-open, bulging eyes. 'You have betrayed the Templar Order. For this you have been sentenced to execution.'

His arm rose in a futile attempt to claw at my eyes, but I moved my head and watched the silk flutter gently as the life left him.

When it was over I carried his body to the bed then went to his desk to take his journal, as I had been instructed. It was open, and my eye fell upon some writing: *'Para ver de manera diferente, primero debemos pensar diferente.'*

I read it again, translating it carefully, as though I were learning a new language: 'To see differently, we must first think differently.'

I stared at it for some moments, deep in thought, then snapped the book shut and stowed it in my bag, returning my mind to the job at hand. Vedomir's death would not be discovered until morning, by which time I would be long gone, on my way to Prague, where I now had something to ask Reginald.

18 June 1747

i

‘It’s about your mother, Haytham.’

He stood before me in the basement of the headquarters on Celetna Lane. He had made no effort to dress for Prague. He wore his Englishness like a badge of honour: neat and tidy white stockings, black breeches and, of course, his wig, which was white and had shed most of its powder on the shoulders of his frock coat. He was lit by the flames from tall iron cressets on poles on either side of him, while mounted on stone walls so dark they were almost black were torches that shone with halos of pale light. Normally he stood relaxed, with his hands behind his back and leaning on his cane, but today there was a formal air about him.

‘Mother?’

‘Yes, Haytham.’

She’s ill, was my first thought, and I instantly felt a hot wave of guilt so intense I was almost giddy with it. I hadn’t written to her in weeks; I’d hardly even thought about her.

‘She’s dead, Haytham,’ said Reginald, casting his eyes downward. ‘A week ago she had a fall. Her back was badly hurt, and I’m afraid that she succumbed to her injuries.’

I looked at him. That intense rush of guilt was gone as quickly as it had arrived and in its place an empty feeling, a hollow place where emotions should be.

‘I’m sorry, Haytham.’ His weathered face creased into sympathy and his eyes were kind. ‘Your mother was a fine woman.’

‘That’s quite all right,’ I said.

‘We’re to leave for England straight away. There’s a memorial service.’

‘I see.’

‘If you need … anything, then please don’t hesitate to ask.’

‘Thank you.’

‘Your family is the Order now, Haytham. You can come to us for anything.’

‘Thank you.’

He cleared his throat uncomfortably. ‘And if you need … you know, to talk, then I’m here.’

I tried not to smile at the idea. ‘Thank you, Reginald, but I won’t need to talk.’

‘Very well.’

There was a long pause.

He looked away. ‘Is it done?’

‘Juan Vedomir is dead, if that’s what you mean.’

‘And you have his journal?’

‘I’m afraid not.’

For a moment his face fell, then it grew hard. Very hard. I’d seen his face do that before, in an unguarded moment.

‘What?’ he said simply.

‘I killed him for his betrayal of our cause, did I not?’ I said.

‘Indeed …’ said Reginald carefully.

‘Then what need did I have of his journal?’

‘It contains his writings. They are of interest to us.’

‘Why?’ I asked.

‘Haytham, I had reason to believe that Juan Vedomir’s treachery went beyond the matter of his adherence to the doctrine. I think he may have advanced to *working* with the Assassins. Now tell me the truth, please, do you have his journal?’

I pulled it from my bag, gave it to him, and he moved over to one of the candelabras, opened it, quickly flicked through then snapped it shut.

‘And have you read it?’ he asked.

‘It’s in code,’ I replied.

‘But not all of it,’ he said equably.

I nodded. ‘Yes – yes, you’re right, there were some passages I was able to read. His … *thoughts* on life. They made interesting reading. In fact, I was particularly intrigued, Reginald, by how much Juan Vedomir’s philosophy was consistent with what my father once taught me.’

‘Quite possibly.’

‘And yet you had me kill him?’

‘I had you kill a traitor to the Order. Which is something else entirely. Of course, I knew your father felt differently to me concerning many – perhaps even most – of the tenets of the Order, but that’s because he didn’t subscribe to them. The fact that he wasn’t a Templar didn’t make me respect him less.’

I looked at him. I wondered if I had been wrong to doubt him. ‘Why, then, is the book of interest?’

‘Not for Vedomir’s musings on life, that much is certain,’ smiled Reginald, and gave me a sideways smile. ‘As you say, they were similar to your father’s, and we both know our feelings about that. No, it’s the coded passages I’m interested in, which, if I’m right, will contain details of the keeper of a key.’

‘A key to what?’

‘All in good time.’

I made a sound of frustration.

‘Once I have decoded the journal, Haytham,’ he pressed. ‘When, if I’m right, we’ll be able to begin the next phase of the operation.’

‘And what might that be?’

He opened his mouth to speak, but I said the words for him. ‘ “All in good time, Haytham,” is that it? More secrets, Reginald?’

He bristled. ‘ “Secrets”? Really? Is that what you think? What exactly have I done to deserve your suspicion, Haytham, other than to take you under my wing, sponsor you in the Order, give you a life? You know, I might be forgiven for thinking you rather ungrateful at times, sir.’

‘We were never able to find Digweed, though, were we?’ I said, refusing to be cowed. ‘There never was a ransom demand for Jenny, so the main purpose of the raid had to be Father’s death.’

‘We *hoped* to find Digweed, Haytham. That’s all we could ever do. We *hoped* to make him pay. That hope was not satisfied, but that doesn’t mean we were derelict in our attempt. Moreover, I had a duty of care to *you*, Haytham, which was fulfilled. You stand before me a man, a respected Knight of the Order. You overlook that, I think. And don’t forget that I hoped to marry Jenny. Perhaps in the heat of your desire to avenge your father, you see losing Digweed as our only significant failure, but it’s not, is it, because we’ve never found Jenny, have we? Of course, you spare no thought for your sister’s hardship.’

‘You accuse me of callousness? Heartlessness?’

He shook his head. ‘I merely request that you turn your stare on your own failings before you start shining light on mine.’

I looked carefully at him. ‘You never took me into your confidence regarding the search.’

‘Braddock was sent to find him. He updated me regularly.’

‘But you didn’t pass those updates to me.’

‘You were a young boy.’

‘Who grew up.’

He bent his head. ‘Then I apologize for not taking that fact into account, Haytham. In future I will treat you as an equal.’

‘Then start now – start by telling me about the journal,’ I said.

He laughed, as though caught in check at chess. ‘You win, Haytham. All right, it represents the first step towards the location of a temple – a first-civilization temple, thought to have been built by Those Who Came Before.’

There was a moment’s pause in which I thought, *Is that it?* Then laughed.

At first he looked shocked, perhaps remembering the first time he’d ever told me about Those Who Came Before, when I’d found it difficult to contain myself. ‘Those who came before what … ?’ I’d scoffed.

‘Before *us*,’ he’d replied tightly, ‘Before man. A previous civilization.’

He frowned at me now. ‘You’re still finding it amusing, Haytham?’

I shook my head. ‘Not amusing so much, no. More …’ I struggled to find the words ‘… hard to fathom, Reginald. A race of beings who existed before man. Gods …’

‘Not gods, Haytham, first-civilization humans who controlled humanity. They left us artefacts, Haytham, of immense power, such that we can only dream of. I believe that whoever can possess those artefacts can ultimately control all of human destiny.’

My laugh dwindled when I saw how serious he had become. ‘It’s a very grand claim, Reginald.’

‘Indeed. If it was a modest claim then we would not be so interested, no? The Assassins would not be interested.’ His eyes gleamed. The flames from the cressets shone and danced in them. I’d seen that look in his eyes before, but only on rare occasions. Not when he’d been tutoring me in languages, philosophy, or even in the classics or the principles of combat. Not even when he taught me the tenets of the Order.

No, only when he talked about Those Who Came Before.

Sometimes Reginald liked to deride what he saw as a surfeit of passion. He thought of it as a shortcoming. When he talked about the beings of the first civilization, however, he talked like a zealot.

ii

We are staying the night in the Templar headquarters here in Prague. As I sit here now in a meagre room with grey stone walls, I can feel the weight of thousands of years of Templar history upon me.

My thoughts go to Queen Anne’s Square, to which the household returned when the work was done. Mr Simpkin had kept us abreast of developments; Reginald had overseen the building operation, even as we moved from country to country in search of Digweed and Jenny. (And yes, Reginald was right. Failing to find Digweed: that fact eats at me; but I almost never think of Jenny.)

One day Simpkin sent us the word that the household had returned from Bloomsbury to Queen Anne's Square, that the household was once again in residence, back where it belonged. That day my mind went to the wood-panelled walls of the home I grew up in, and I found I could vividly picture the people within it – especially my mother. But, of course, I was picturing the mother I had known growing up, who shone, bright like the sun and twice as warm, on whose knee I knew perfect happiness. My love for Father was fierce, perhaps stronger, but for Mother it was purer. With Father I had a feeling of awe, of admiration so grand I sometimes felt dwarfed by him, and with that came an underlying feeling I can only describe as anxiety, that somehow I had to live up to him, to grow into the huge shadow cast by him.

With Mother, though, there was no such insecurity, just the almost overwhelming sense of comfort and love and protection. And she was a beauty. I used to enjoy it when people compared me to Father because he was so striking, but if they said I looked like Mother I knew they meant *handsome*. Of Jenny, people would say, 'She'll *break* a few hearts'; 'She'll have men *fighting* over her.' They applied the language of struggle and conflict. But not with Mother. Her beauty was a gentle, maternal, nurturing thing, to be spoken of not with the wariness Jenny's looks inspired, but with warmth and admiration.

Of course, I had never known Jenny's mother, Caroline Scott, but I had formed an opinion of her: that she was 'a Jenny', and that my father had been captivated by her looks just as Jenny's suitors were captivated by hers.

Mother, though, I imagined to be an entirely different sort of person altogether. She was plain old Tessa Stephenson-Oakley when she met my father. That's what she had always said, anyway: 'plain old Tessa Stephenson-Oakley,' which didn't sound at all plain to me, but never mind. Father had moved to London, arriving alone with no household, but a purse large enough to buy one. When he had rented a London home from a wealthy landowner, the daughter had offered to help my father find permanent accommodation, as well as employing the household to run it. The daughter, of course, was 'plain old Tessa Stephenson-Oakley' …

She had all but hinted that her family wasn't happy about the liaison; indeed, we never saw her side of the family. She devoted her energies to us and, until that dreadful night, the person who had her undivided attention, her unending affection, her unconditional love, was me.

But the last time I had seen her there was no sign of that person. When I think back to our final meeting now, what I remember is the suspicion in her eyes, which I realize was contempt. When I killed the man about to kill her, I changed in her eyes. I was no longer the boy who had sat on her knee.

I was a killer.

20 June 1747

En route to London, I re-read an old journal. Why? Some instinct, perhaps. Some sub-conscious nagging … doubt, I suppose.

Whatever it was, when I re-read the entry of 10 December 1735, I all of a sudden knew exactly what I had to do when I reached England.

2-3 July 1747

Today was the service, and also … well, I shall explain.

After the service, I left Reginald talking to Mr Simpkin on the steps of the chapel. To me, Mr Simpkin said that he had some papers for me to sign. In the light of Mother's death, the finances were mine. With an obsequious smile he said he hoped that I had considered him more than satisfactory in managing the affairs so far. I nodded, smiled, said nothing committal, told them I wanted a little time to myself, and slipped away, seemingly to be alone with my thoughts.

I hoped that the direction of my wanderings looked random as I made my way along the thoroughfare, staying clear of carriage wheels that splashed through mud and manure on the highway, weaving through people thronging the streets: tradesmen in bloodied leather aprons, whores and washerwomen. But it wasn't. It wasn't random at all.

One woman in particular was up ahead, like me, making her way through the crowds, alone and, probably, lost in thought. I had seen her at the service, of course. She'd sat with the other staff – Emily, and two or three others I didn't recognize – on the other side of the chapel, with a handkerchief at her nose. She had looked up and seen me – she must have done – but she made no sign. I wondered, did Betty, my old nursemaid, even recognize me?

And now I was following her, keeping a discreet distance behind so she wouldn't see me if she happened to glance backwards. It was getting dark by the time she reached home, or not home but the household for which she now worked, a grand mansion that loomed in the charcoal sky, not too dissimilar to the one at Queen Anne's Square. Was she still a nursemaid, I wondered, or had she moved up in the world? Did she wear the uniform of a governess beneath her coat? The street was less crowded than before, and I lingered out of sight, watching as she took a short flight of stone steps down towards the below-stairs quarters and let herself in.

When she was out of sight I crossed the highway and sauntered towards the house, aware of the need to look inconspicuous in case eyes were seeing me from the windows. Once upon a time I was a young boy who had looked from the windows of the house in Queen Anne's Square, watched passers-by come

and go and wondered about their business. Was there a little boy in this household watching me now, wondering who is this man? Where has he come from? Where is he going?

So I wandered along the railings at the front of the mansion and glanced down to see the lit windows of what I assumed were the servants' quarters, only to be rewarded with the unmistakable silhouette of Betty appearing at the glass and drawing a curtain. I had the information I'd come for.

I returned after midnight, when the drapes at the windows of the mansion were shut, the street was dark and the only lights were those fixed to the occasional passing carriage.

Once again I made my way to the front of the house, and with a quick look left and right scaled the railings and dropped silently down into the gully on the other side. I scuttled along it until I found Betty's window, where I stopped and very carefully placed my ear to the glass, listening for some moments until I was satisfied that there was no movement from within.

And then, with infinite patience, I applied my fingertips to the bottom of the sash window and lifted, praying it wouldn't squeak and, when my prayers were answered, letting myself in and closing the window behind me.

In the bed she stirred slightly – at the breath of air from the open window perhaps; some unconscious sensing of my presence? Like a statue I stood and waited for her deep breathing to resume, and felt the air around me settle, my incursion absorbed into the room so that after a few moments it was as though I were a part of it – as though I had always been a part of it, like a ghost.

And then I took out my sword.

It was fitting – ironic, perhaps – that it should have been the sword given to me by my father. These days, I rarely go anywhere without it. Years ago, Reginald asked me when I expected it to taste blood, and it has, of course, many times. And if I was right about Betty, then it would once again.

I sat on the bed and put the blade of the sword close to her throat, then clamped my hand over her mouth.

She woke. Immediately her eyes were wide with terror. Her mouth moved and my palm tickled and vibrated as she tried to scream.

I held her thrashing body still and said nothing, just allowed her eyes to adjust until she could see me, and she must have recognized me. How could she not, when she nursed me for ten years, was like a mother to me? How can she not have recognized Master Haytham?

When she had finished struggling, I whispered, 'Hello, Betty,' with my hand still over her mouth. 'I have something I need to ask you. To answer you will need to speak. For you to speak I'll need to take my hand from your mouth and

you may be tempted to scream, but if you scream …' I applied the tip of the sword to her throat to make my point. And, then, very gently, I lifted my hand from her mouth.

Her eyes were hard, like granite. For a moment I felt myself retreat to childhood and was almost intimidated by the fire and fury there, as though the sight of them triggered a memory of being scolded that I couldn't help but respond to.

'I should put you over my knee for this, Master Haytham,' she hissed. 'How dare you creep into a lady's room when she sleeps? Did I teach you nothing? Did Edith teach you nothing? Your mother?' Her voice was rising. *'Did your father teach you nothing?'*

That childhood feeling stayed with me, and I had to reach into myself to find resolve, fighting an urge simply to put away my sword and say, 'Sorry, Nurse Betty,' promise never to do it again, that I would be a good boy from now on.

The thought of my father gave me that resolve.

'It's true you were like a mother to me once, Betty,' I said to her. 'It's true that what I'm doing is a terrible, unforgivable thing to do. Believe me, I'm not here lightly. But what you've done is terrible, and unforgivable, too.'

Her eyes narrowed. 'What do you mean?'

With my other hand I reached inside my frock coat and retrieved a folded piece of paper, which I held for her to see in the near-dark of the room. 'You remember Laura, the kitchen maid?'

Cautious, she nodded.

'She sent me a letter,' I went on. 'A letter that told me all about your relationship with Digweed. For how long was Father's gentleman your fancy man, Betty?'

There was no such letter; the piece of paper I held contained nothing more revelatory than the address of my lodgings for the night, and I was relying on the low light to fool her. The truth was that when I'd re-read my old journals I'd been taken back to that moment many, many years ago when I had gone to look for Betty. She had been having her 'little lie-in' that cold morning, and when I peered through her keyhole I'd seen a pair of men's boots in her room. I hadn't realized at the time because I was too young. I'd seen them with the eyes of a nine-year-old and thought nothing of them. Not then. Not ever since.

Not until reading it afresh, when, like a joke that suddenly makes sense, I had understood: the boots had belonged to her lover. Of course they had. What I was less certain of was that her lover was Digweed. I remember that she used to speak of him with great affection, but then so did everyone; he had fooled us all.

But when I left for Europe in the care of Reginald, Digweed had found alternative employment for Betty.

Even so, it was a guess that they were lovers – a considered, educated guess, but risky, with terrible consequences, if I was wrong.

'Do you remember the day you had a little lie-in, Betty?' I asked. 'A "little lie-in", do you remember?'

She nodded her head warily.

'I came to see where you were,' I continued. 'I was cold, you see. And in the passage outside your room – well, I don't like to admit it, but I knelt down and I looked through your keyhole.'

I felt myself colour slightly, despite everything. She'd been staring balefully up at me, but now her eyes went flinty and her lips pursed crossly, almost as though this ancient intrusion were as bad as the current one.

'I didn't see anything,' I clarified quickly. 'Not unless you count you, slumbering in bed, and also a pair of men's boots that I recognized as belonging to Digweed. Were you having an affair with him, is that it?'

'Oh, Master Haytham,' she whispered, shaking her head and with sad eyes, 'what has become of you? What sort of man has that Birch turned you into? That you should be holding a knife to the throat of a lady of my advancing years is bad enough – oh, that's bad enough. But look at you now, you're ladling hurt on hurt, accusing me of having an *affair*, being a home-wrecker. It was no affair. Mr Digweed had children, that's true, who were looked after by his sister in Herefordshire, but his wife died many years before he even joined the household. Ours was not an affair the way you're thinking with your dirty mind. We were in love, and shame on you thinking otherwise. Shame on you.' She shook her head again.

Feeling my hand tighten on the handle of the sword, I squeezed my eyes shut. 'No, no, it's not me who should be made to feel at fault here. You can try and come high and mighty with me all you like, but the fact is that you had a … relationship of some kind, of whatever kind – it doesn't *matter* what kind – with Digweed, and Digweed betrayed us. Without that betrayal my father would be alive. Mother would be alive, and I would not be sitting here with a knife to your throat, so don't blame me for your current predicament, Betty. Blame him.'

She took a deep breath and composed herself. 'He had no choice,' she said at last, 'Jack didn't. Oh, that was his name, by the way: Jack. Did you know that?'

'I'll read it on his gravestone,' I hissed, 'and knowing it makes not a blind bit of difference, because he did have a choice, Betty. Whether it was a choice between the devil and the deep blue sea, I don't care. He had a choice.'

'No – the man threatened Jack's children.'

‘ “Man”? What man?’

‘I don’t know. A man who first spoke to Jack in town.’

‘Did you ever see him?’

‘No.’

‘What did Digweed say about him? Was he from the West Country?’

‘Jack said he had the accent sir, yes. Why?’

‘When the men kidnapped Jenny, she was screaming about a traitor. Violet from next door heard her, but the following day a man with a West Country accent came to speak to her – to warn her not to tell anyone what she’d heard.’

West Country. Betty had blanched, I saw. ‘What?’ I snapped. ‘What have I said?’

‘It’s Violet, sir,’ she gasped. ‘Not long after you left for Europe – it could even have been the day after – she met her end in a street robbery.’

‘They came good on their word,’ I said. I looked at her. ‘Tell me about the man giving Digweed his orders,’ I said.

‘Nothing. Jack never said anything about him. That he meant business; that if Jack didn’t do as they told him then they would find his children and kill them. They said that if he told the master then they’d find his boys, cut them and kill them slowly, all of that. They told him what they were planning to do to the house, but on my life, Master Haytham, they told him that nobody would be hurt; that it would all happen at the dead of night.’

Something occurred to me. ‘Why did they even need him?’

She looked perplexed.

‘He wasn’t even there on the night of the attack,’ I continued. ‘It wasn’t as if they required help getting in. They took Jenny, killed Father. Why was Digweed needed for that?’

‘I don’t know, Master Haytham,’ she said. ‘I really don’t.’

When I looked down at her, it was with a kind of numbness. Before, when I’d been waiting for darkness to fall, anger had been simmering, bubbling within me, the idea of Digweed’s treachery lighting a fire beneath my fury, the idea that Betty had colluded, or even known, adding fuel to it.

I’d wanted her to be innocent. Most of all I’d wanted her dalliance to be with another member of the household. But if it was with Digweed then I wanted her to know nothing about his betrayal. I wanted her to be innocent, for if she was guilty then I had to kill her, because if she could have done something to stop the slaughter of that night and failed to act, then she had to die. That was … that was *justice*. It was cause and effect. Checks and balances. An eye for an eye. And that’s what I believe in. That’s my ideology. A way of negotiating a passage

through life that makes sense even when life itself so rarely does. A way of imposing order upon chaos.

But the last thing I wanted to do was kill her.

‘Where is he now?’ I asked softly.

‘I don’t know, Master Haytham.’ Her voice quavered with fear. ‘The last time I heard from him was the morning he disappeared.’

‘Who else knew you and he were lovers?’

‘Nobody,’ she replied. ‘We were always so careful.’

‘Apart from leaving his boots in view.’

‘They were moved sharpish.’ Her eyes hardened. ‘And most folk weren’t in the habit of peering through the keyhole.’

There was a pause. ‘What happens now, Master Haytham?’ she said, a catch in her voice.

‘I should kill you, Betty,’ I said simply, and looking into her eyes I saw the realization dawn on her that I could if I wanted to; that I was capable of doing it.

She whimpered.

I stood. ‘But I won’t. There’s already been too much death as a result of that night. We will not meet again. For your years of service and nurture I award you your life and leave you with your shame. Goodbye.’

14 July 1747

i

After neglecting my journal for almost two weeks I have much to tell and should recap, going right back to the night I visited Betty.

After leaving I'd returned to my lodgings, slept for a few fitful hours, then rose, dressed and took a carriage back to her house. There I bid the driver wait some distance away, close enough to see, but not close enough to draw suspicion, and as he snoozed, grateful for the rest, I sat and gazed out of the window, and waited.

For what? I didn't know for sure. Yet again I was listening to my instinct.

And yet again it proved correct, for not long after daybreak, Betty appeared.

I dismissed the driver, followed her on foot and, sure enough, she made her way to the General Post Office on Lombard Street, went in, reappeared some minutes later, and then made her way back along the street until she was swallowed up by the crowds.

I watched her go, feeling nothing, not the urge to follow her and slit her throat for her treachery, not even the vestiges of the affection we once had. Just … nothing.

Instead I took up position in a doorway and watched the world go by, flicking beggars and street sellers away with my cane as I waited for perhaps an hour until …

Yes, there he was – the letter carrier, carrying his bell and case full of mail. I pushed myself out of the doorway and, twirling my cane, followed him, closer and closer until he moved on to a side road where there were fewer pedestrians, and I spotted my chance …

Moments later I was kneeling by his bleeding and unconscious body in an alleyway, sorting through the contents of his letter case until I found it – an envelope addressed to 'Jack Digweed'. I read it – it said that she loved him, and that I had found out about their relationship; nothing in there I didn't already know – but it wasn't the contents of the letter I was interested in so much as the

destination, and there it was on the front of the envelope, which was bound for the Black Forest, for a small town called St Peter, not far from Freiburg.

Almost two weeks of journeying later, Reginald and I came within sight of St Peter in the distance, a cluster of buildings nestled at the bottom of a valley otherwise rich with verdant fields and patches of forest. That was this morning.

ii

We reached it at around noon, dirty and tired from our travels. Trotting slowly through narrow, labyrinthine streets, I saw the upturned faces of the residents, glimpsed either from pathways or turning quickly away from windows, closing doors and drawing curtains. We had death on our minds, and at the time I thought they somehow knew this, or perhaps were easily spooked. What I didn't know was that we weren't the first strangers to ride into town that morning. The townspeople were *already* spooked.

The letter had been addressed care of the St Peter General Store. We came to a small plaza, with a fountain shaded by chestnut trees, and asked for directions from a nervous townswoman. Others gave us a wide berth as she pointed the way then sidled off, staring at her shoes. Moments later we were tethering our horses outside the store and walking in, only for the sole customer to take a look at us and decide to stock up on provisions another time. Reginald and I exchanged a confused look, then I cast an eye over the store. Tall, wooden shelves lined three sides, stocked with jars and packets tied up with twine, while at the back was a high counter behind which stood the storekeeper, wearing an apron, a wide moustache and a smile that had faded like an exhausted candle on getting a good look at us.

To my left was a set of steps used to reach the high shelves. On them sat a boy, about ten years old, the storekeeper's son, by the look of him. He almost lost his footing in his haste to scuttle off the steps and stand in the middle of the floor with his hands by his side, awaiting his orders.

'Good afternoon, gentlemen,' said the shopkeeper in German. 'You look like you have been riding a long time. You need some supplies to continue your journey?' He indicated an urn on the counter before him. 'You need some refreshments perhaps? A drink?'

Next he was waving a hand at the boy. 'Christophe, have you forgotten your manners? Take the gentlemen's coats …'

There were three stools in front of the counter and the shopkeeper waved a hand at them, saying, 'Please, please, take a seat.'

I glanced again at Reginald, saw he was about to move forward to accept the storekeeper's offer of hospitality, and stopped him.

'No, thank you,' I said to the shopkeeper. 'My friend and I don't intend to stay.' From the corner of my eye I saw Reginald's shoulders sag, but he said nothing. 'All we need from you is information,' I added.

A cautious look fell across the shopkeeper's face like a dark curtain. 'Yes?' he said warily.

'We need to find a man. His name is Digweed. Jack Digweed. Are you acquainted with him?'

He shook his head.

'You don't know him at all?' I pressed.

Again the shake of the head.

'Haytham …' said Reginald, as though he could read my mind from the tone of my voice.

I ignored him. 'Are you quite sure about that?' I insisted.

'Yes, sir,' said the shopkeeper. His moustache quivered nervously. He swallowed.

I felt my jaw tighten; then, before anybody had a chance to react, I'd drawn my sword and with my outstretched arm tucked the blade beneath Christophe's chin. The boy gasped, raised himself on his tiptoes, and his eyes darted as the blade pressed into his throat. I hadn't taken my eyes off the shopkeeper.

'Haytham …' said Reginald again.

'Let me handle this, please, Reginald,' I said, and addressed the storekeeper: 'Digweed's letters are sent care of this address,' I said. 'Let me ask you again. Where is he?'

'Sir,' pleaded the shopkeeper. His eyes darted from me to Christophe, who was making a series of low noises, as though he were finding it difficult to swallow. 'Please don't hurt my son.'

His pleas fell on deaf ears.

'Where is he?' I repeated.

'Sir,' pleaded the owner. His hands implored. 'I cannot say.'

With a tiny flick of the wrist I increased the pressure of my blade on Christophe's throat and was rewarded with a whimper. From the corner of my eye I saw the boy rise even higher on his tiptoes and felt, but did not see, Reginald's discomfort to the other side of me. All the time, my eyes never left those of the shopkeeper.

'Please sir, please sir,' he said quickly, those imploring hands waving in the air as though he were trying to juggle an invisible glass, 'I can't say. I was warned not to.'

‘Ah-ha,’ I said. ‘Who? Who warned you? Was it him? Was it Digweed?’

‘No, sir,’ insisted the shopkeeper. ‘I haven’t seen Master Digweed for some weeks. This was … someone else, but I can’t tell you – I can’t tell you who. These men, they were serious.’

‘But I think we know that I, too, am serious,’ I said with a smile, ‘and the difference between them and me is that I am here and they are not. Now tell me. How many men, who were they and what did they want to know?’

His eyes flicked from me to Christophe, who though brave and stoic and displaying the kind of fortitude under duress that I’d hope for my own son, whimpered again nonetheless, which must have made up the storekeeper’s mind, because his moustache trembled a little more, then he spoke, quickly, the words tumbling from him.

‘They were here, sir,’ he said. ‘Just an hour or so ago. Two men with long black coats over the red tunics of the British Army, who came into the store just as you did and asked the whereabouts of Master Digweed. When I told them, thinking little of it, they became very grave, sir, and told me that some more men might arrive looking for Master Digweed, and, if they did, then I was to deny all knowledge of him, on pain of death, and not to say that they had been here.’

‘Where is he?’

‘A cabin, fifteen miles north of here in the woods.’

Neither Reginald nor I said a word. We both knew we didn’t have a minute to spare, and without pausing to make more threats, or to say goodbye, or perhaps even apologize to Christophe for frightening him half to death, we both dashed out of the door, untethered and mounted our steeds, and spurred them on with yells.

We rode as hard as we dared for over half an hour, until we had covered maybe eight miles of pasture, all of it uphill, our horses now becoming tired. We came to a tree line, only to discover that it was a narrow band of pine, and we arrived on the other side to see a ribbon of trees stretching around the summit of a hill on either side. Meanwhile, in front of us the ground sloped down into more woodland, then away, undulating like a huge blanket of green, patched with forestry, grass and fields.

We pulled up and I called for the spyglass. Our horses snorted and I scanned the area in front of us, swinging the spyglass from left to right, crazily at first, with the emergency getting the better of me, panic making me indiscriminate. In the end I had to force myself to calm down, taking deep breaths and screwing up my eyes tight then starting again, this time moving the spyglass slowly and methodically across the landscape. In my head I divided the territory into a grid

and moved from one square to another, back to being systematic and efficient, back to having logic in charge, not emotion.

A silence of gentle wind and birdsong was broken by Reginald. ‘Would you have done it?’

‘Done what, Reginald?’

He meant kill the child.

‘Kill the boy. Would you have done it?’

‘There is little point in making a threat if you can’t carry it out. The storekeeper would have known if I was shamming. He would have seen it in my eyes. He would have known.’

Reginald shifted uneasily in his saddle. ‘So, *yes*, then? Yes, you would have killed him?’

‘That’s right, Reginald, I would have killed him.’

There was a pause. I completed the next square of land, then the next.

‘When was the killing of innocents ever part of your teaching, Haytham?’ said Reginald.

I gave a snort. ‘Just because you taught me to kill, Reginald, it doesn’t give you the final say on whom I kill and to what end.’

‘I taught you honour. I taught you a code.’

‘I remember you, Reginald, about to dispense your own form of justice outside White’s all those years ago. Was that honourable?’

Did he redden slightly? Certainly he shifted uncomfortably on his horse. ‘The man was a thief,’ he said.

‘The men I seek are murderers, Reginald.’

‘Even so,’ he said, with a touch of irritation, ‘perhaps your zeal is clouding your judgement.’

Again I gave a contemptuous snort. ‘This from you. Is your fascination with Those Who Came Before strictly speaking in line with Templar policy?’

‘Of course.’

‘Really? Are you sure you haven’t been neglecting your other duties in favour of it? What letter-writing, what journalling, what reading have you been doing lately, Reginald?’

‘Plenty,’ he said indignantly.

‘That *hasn’t* been connected with Those Who Came Before,’ I added.

For a moment he blustered, sounding like a red-faced fat man given the wrong meat at dinner. ‘I’m here now, aren’t I?’

‘Indeed, Reginald,’ I said, just as I saw a tiny plume of smoke coming from the woodland. ‘I see smoke in the trees, possibly from a cabin. We should head for there.’

At the same time there was a movement not far away in a crop of fir trees and I saw a rider heading up the furthest hill, away from us.

‘Look, Reginald, there. Do you see him?’

I adjusted the focus. The rider had his back to us of course and was a distance away, but one thing I thought I could see was his ears. I was sure he had pointed ears.

‘I see one man, Haytham, but where is the other?’ said Reginald.

Already pulling on the reins of my steed, I said, ‘Still in the cabin, Reginald. Let’s go.’

iii

It was perhaps another twenty minutes before we arrived. Twenty minutes during which I pushed my steed to her limit, risking her through trees and over wind-fallen branches, leaving Reginald behind as I raced towards where I’d seen the smoke – to the cabin where I was sure I’d find Digweed.

Alive? Dead? I didn’t know. But the storekeeper had said there were two men asking for him, and we’d only accounted for one of them, so I was eager to know about the other one. Had he gone on ahead?

Or was he still in the cabin?

There it was, sitting in the middle of a clearing. A squat wooden building, one horse tethered outside, with a single window at the front and tendrils of smoke puffing from the chimney. The front door was open. Wide open. At the same time as I came bolting into the clearing I heard a scream from inside, and I spurred my steed to the door, drawing my sword. With a great clatter we came on to the boards at the front of the house and I craned forward in my saddle to see the scene inside.

Digweed was tied to a chair, shoulders sagging, head tilted. His face was a mask of blood, but I could see that his lips were moving. He was alive, and standing over him was the second man, holding a bloodstained knife – a knife with a curved, serrated blade – and about to finish the job. About to slit Digweed’s throat.

I’d never used my sword as a spear before and, take it from me, it’s a far from ideal use for it, but at that exact moment my priority was keeping Digweed alive. I needed to speak to him, and, besides, nobody was going to kill Digweed but me. So I threw it. It was all I had time to do. And though my throw had as little power as it did aim, it hit the knifeman’s arm just as the blade arced down, and it was enough – enough to send him staggering back with a howl of pain at the

same time as I threw myself off the horse, landed on the boards inside of the cabin, rolled forward and snatched out my short sword at the same time.

And it had been enough to save Digweed.

I landed right by him. Bloodstained rope kept his arms and legs tied to the chair. His clothes were torn and black with blood, his face swollen and bleeding. His lips still moved. His eyes slid lazily over to see me and I wondered what he thought in the brief moment that he took me in. Did he recognize me? Did he feel a bolt of guilt, or a flash of hope?

Then my eyes went to a back window, only to see the knifeman's legs disappearing through it as he squeezed himself out and fell with a thump to the ground outside. To follow through the window meant putting myself in a vulnerable position – I didn't fancy being stuck in the frame while the knifeman had all the time in the world to plunge his blade into me. So instead I ran to the front door and back into the clearing to give chase. Reginald was just arriving. He'd seen the knifeman, had a better view of him than I did, and was already taking aim with his bow.

'Don't kill him,' I roared, just as he fired, and he howled in displeasure as the arrow went wide.

'Damn you, man, I had him,' he shouted. 'He's in the trees now.'

I'd rounded the front of the cabin in time, feet kicking up a carpet of dead and dry pine needles just in time to see the knifeman disappear into the tree line. 'I need him alive, Reginald,' I shouted back at him. 'Digweed's in the cabin. Keep him safe until I return.'

And with that I burst into the trees, leaves and branches whipping my face as I thundered on, short sword in hand. Ahead of me I saw a dark shape in the foliage, crashing through it with as little grace as I was.

Or perhaps *less* grace, because I was gaining on him.

'Were you there?' I shouted at him. 'Were you there the night they killed my father?'

'I didn't have that pleasure, boy,' he called back over his shoulder. 'How I wish I had been. I did my bit, though. I was the fixer.'

Of course. He had a West Country accent. Now, who had been described as having a West Country accent? The man who had blackmailed Digweed. The man who had threatened Violet and shown her an evil-looking knife.

'Stand and face me!' I shouted. 'You're so keen for Kenway blood, let's see if you can't spill mine!'

I was nimbler than he was. Faster, and closer now. I'd heard the wheeze in his voice when he spoke to me, and it was only a matter of time before I caught him. He knew it, and rather than tire himself further he decided to turn and fight,

hurdling one final wind-fallen branch, which brought him into a small clearing, spinning about, the curved blade in his hand. The curved, serrated, ‘evil-looking’ blade. His face was grizzled and terribly pockmarked, as though scarred from some childhood disease. He breathed heavily as he wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. He’d lost his hat in the chase, revealing close-cropped, greying hair, and his coat – dark, just as the storekeeper had described it – was torn, fluttering open to reveal his red army tunic.

‘You’re a British soldier,’ I said.

‘That’s the uniform I wear,’ he sneered, ‘but my allegiances lie elsewhere.’

‘Indeed, do they? To whom do you swear loyalty, then?’ I asked. ‘Are you an Assassin?’

He shook his head. ‘I’m my own man, boy. Something you can only dream of being.’

‘It’s a long time since anybody’s called me boy,’ I said.

‘You think you’ve made a name for yourself, Haytham Kenway. The killer. The Templar blademan. Because you’ve killed a couple of fat merchants? But to me you’re a boy. You’re a boy because a man faces his targets, man to man, he doesn’t steal up behind them in the dead of night, like a snake.’ He paused. ‘Like an *Assassin*.’

He began to swap his knife from one hand to the other. The effect was almost hypnotic – or at least that’s what I let him believe.

‘You think I can’t fight?’ I said.

‘You’re yet to prove it.’

‘Here’s as good a place as any.’

He spat and beckoned me forward with one hand, rolling the blade in the other. ‘Come on,’ he goaded me. ‘Come be a warrior for the first time. Come see what it feels like. Come on, boy. Be a man.’

It was supposed to anger me, but instead it made me focus. I needed him alive. I needed him to talk.

I leapt over the branch and into the clearing, swinging a little wildly to push him back but recovering my stance quickly, before he could press forward with a counter-attack of his own. For some moments we circled one another, each waiting for the other to launch his next attack. I broke the stalemate by lunging forward, slashing, then instantly retreating to my guard.

For a second he thought I’d missed. Then he felt the blood begin to trickle down his cheek and touched a hand to his face, his eyes widening in surprise. First blood to me.

‘You’ve underestimated me,’ I said.

His smile was a little more strained this time. ‘There won’t be a second time.’

‘There will be,’ I replied, and came forward again, feinting towards the left then going right when his body was already committed to the wrong line of defence.

A gash opened up in his free arm. Blood stained his tattered sleeve and began dripping to the forest floor, bright red on brown and green needles.

‘I’m better than you know,’ I said. ‘All you have to look forward to is death – unless you talk. Unless you tell me everything you know. Who are you working for?’

I danced forward and slashed as his knife flailed wildly. His other cheek opened. There were now two scarlet ribbons on the brown leather of his face.

‘Why was my father killed?’

I came forward again and this time sliced the back of his knife hand. If I’d been hoping he’d drop the knife, then I was disappointed. If I’d been hoping to give him a demonstration of my skills, then that’s exactly what I’d done, and it showed on his face. His now bloody face. He wasn’t grinning any more.

But he still had fight in him, and when he came forward it was fast and smooth and he swapped his knife from one hand to the other to try to misdirect me, and almost made contact. Almost. He might even have done it – if he hadn’t already showed me that particular trick; if he hadn’t been slowed down by the injuries I’d inflicted on him.

As it was, I ducked easily beneath his blade and struck upwards, burying my own in his flank. Immediately I was cursing, though. I’d hit him too hard and in the kidney. He was dead. The internal bleeding would kill him in around thirty minutes; but he could pass out straight away. Whether he knew it himself or not I don’t know, for he was coming at me again, his teeth bared. They were coated with blood now, I noticed, and I swung easily away, took hold of his arm, twisted into his body and broke it at the elbow.

The sound he made wasn’t a scream so much as an anguished inhalation, and as I crunched the bones in his arm, more for effect than for any useful purpose, his knife dropped to the forest floor with a soft thump and he followed it, sinking to his knees.

I let go of his arm, which dropped limply, a bag of broken bones and skin. Looking down, I could see the blood had already drained from his face, and around his midriff was a spreading, black stain. His coat pooled around him on the ground. Feebly, he felt for his loose and limp arm with his good hand, and when he looked up at me there was something almost plaintive in his eyes, something pathetic.

‘Why did you kill him?’ I asked evenly.

Like water escaping from a leaking flask he crumpled, until he was lying on his side. All that concerned him now was dying.

‘Tell me,’ I pressed, and bent close to where he now lay, with pine needles clinging to the blood on his face. He was breathing his last breaths into the mulch of the forest floor.

‘Your father …’ he started, then coughed a small gobbet of blood before starting again. ‘Your father was not a Templar.’

‘I know,’ I snapped. ‘Was he killed for that?’ I felt my brow furrow. ‘Was he killed because he refused to join the Order?’

‘He was an … an Assassin.’

‘And the Templars killed him? They killed him for that?’

‘No. He was killed for what he had.’

‘What?’ I leaned forward, desperate to catch his words. ‘What did he have?’

There was no reply.

‘Who?’ I said, almost shouting. ‘Who killed him?’

But he was out. Mouth open, his eyes fluttered then closed, and however much I slapped him he refused to regain consciousness.

An Assassin. Father was an Assassin. I rolled the knifeman over, closed his staring eyes and began to empty his pockets on to the ground. Out came the usual collection of tins, as well as a few tattered bits of paper, one of which I unfurled to find a set of enlistment papers. They were for a regiment, the Coldstream Guards to be precise, one and a half guineas for joining, then a shilling a day. The paymaster’s name was on the enlistment papers. It was Lieutenant-Colonel Edward Braddock.

And Braddock was with his army in the Dutch Republic, taking arms against the French. I thought of the pointy-eared man I’d seen riding out earlier. All of a sudden I knew where he was heading.

iv

I turned and crashed back through the forest to the cabin, making it back in moments. Outside were the three horses, grazing patiently in bright sunshine; inside, it was dark and cooler, and Reginald stood over Digweed, whose head lolled as he sat, still tied to the chair, and, I knew, from the second I clapped eyes on him …

‘He’s dead,’ I said simply, and looked at Reginald.

‘I tried to save him, Haytham, but the poor soul was too far gone.’

‘How?’ I said sharply.

‘Of his wounds,’ snapped Reginald. ‘Look at him, man.’

Digweed's face was a mask of drying blood. His clothes were caked with it. The knifeman had made him suffer, that much was certain.

'He was alive when I left.'

'And he was alive when I arrived, damn it,' seethed Reginald.

'At least tell me you got something from him.'

His eyes dropped. 'He said he was sorry before he died.'

With a frustrated swish of my sword I slammed a beaker into the fireplace.

'That was all? Nothing about the night of the attack? No reason? No names?'

'Damn your eyes, Haytham. Damn your eyes, do you think I killed him? Do you think I came all this way, neglected my other duties, just to see Digweed dead? I wanted to find him as much as you did. I wanted him *alive* as much as you did.'

It was as though I could feel my entire skull harden. 'I doubt that very much,' I spat.

'Well, what happened to the other one?' asked Reginald back.

'He died.'

Reginald wore an ironic look. 'Oh, I see. And whose fault was that, exactly?'

I ignored him. 'The killer, he is known to Braddock.'

Reginald reared back. 'Really?'

Back at the clearing I'd stuffed the papers into my coat, and I brought them out now in a handful, like the head of a cauliflower. 'Here – his enlistment papers. He's in the Coldstream Guards, under Braddock's command.'

'Hardly the same thing, Haytham. Edward has a force fifteen hundred-strong, many of them enlisted in the country. I'm sure every single man has an unsavoury past and I'm sure Edward knows very little about it.'

'Even so, a coincidence, don't you think? The storekeeper said they both wore the uniform of the British Army, and my guess is the rider we saw is on his way to them now. He has – what? – an hour's head start? I'll not be far behind. Braddock's in the Dutch Republic, is he not? That's where he'll be heading, back to his general.'

'Now, careful, Haytham,' said Reginald. Steel crept into his eyes and into his voice. 'Edward is a friend of mine.'

'I have never liked him,' I said, with a touch of childish impudence.

'Oh, pish!' exploded Reginald. 'An opinion formed by you as a boy because Edward didn't show you the deference you were accustomed to – because, I might add, he was doing his utmost to bring your father's killers to justice. Let me tell you, Haytham, Edward serves the Order, is a good and faithful servant and always has been.'

I turned to him, and it was on the tip of my tongue to say, ‘But wasn’t Father an Assassin?’ when I stopped myself. Some … feeling, or instinct – difficult to say what it was – made me decide to keep that information to myself.

Reginald saw me do it – saw the words pile up behind my teeth and maybe even saw the lie in my eyes.

‘The killer,’ he pressed, ‘did he say anything else at all? Were you able to drag any more information out of him before he died?’

‘Only as much as you could get from Digweed,’ I replied. There was a small stove at one end of the cabin and by it a chopping block, where I found part of a loaf, which I stuffed into my pocket.

‘What are you doing?’ said Reginald.

‘Getting what provisions I can for my ride, Reginald.’

There was a bowl of apples, too. I’d need those for my horse.

‘A stale loaf. Some apples? It isn’t enough, Haytham. At least go back to the town for supplies.’

‘No time, Reginald,’ I said. ‘And, anyway, the chase will be short. He only has a short head start and he doesn’t know he’s being pursued. With any luck I can catch him before I have need of supplies.’

‘We can collect food on the way. I can help you.’

But I stopped him. I was going alone, I said, and before he could argue I’d mounted my steed and taken her in the direction I’d seen the pointy-eared man go in, my hopes high I could catch him shortly.

They were dashed. I rode hard, but in the end the dark drew in; it had become too dangerous to continue and I risked injuring my horse. In any case, she was exhausted, so reluctantly I decided to stop and let her rest for a few hours.

And as I sit here writing, I wonder why, after all the years of Reginald being like a father to me, a mentor, a tutor and guide – why did I decide to ride out alone? And why did I keep from him what I’d discovered about Father?

Have I changed? Has he changed? Or is it that the bond we once shared has changed?

The temperature has dropped. My steed – and it seems only right that I should give her a name and so, in honour of the way she’s already starting to nuzzle me when in need of an apple, I’ve called her Scratch – lies nearby, her eyes closed, and seems content, and I write in my journal.

I think about what Reginald and I talked of. I wonder if he’s right to question the man I have become.

15 July 1747

I rose early in the morning, as soon as it was light, raked over the dying coals of my fire and mounted Scratch.

The chase continued. As I rode I mulled over the possibilities. Why had Pointy Ears and the knifeman gone their separate ways? Were they both intending to journey to the Dutch Republic and join Braddock? Would Pointy Ears be expecting his confederate to catch him up?

I had no way of knowing. I could only hope that, whatever their plans, the man ahead of me had no idea I was in pursuit.

But if he didn't – and how could he? – then why wasn't I catching him?

And I rode fast but steadily, aware that coming upon him too quickly would be just as disastrous as not catching him at all.

After about three quarters of an hour I came upon a spot where he had rested. If I'd pushed Scratch for longer, would I have disturbed him, taken him by surprise? I knelt to feel the dying warmth of his fire. To my left, Scratch muzzled something on the ground, a bit of discarded sausage, and my stomach rumbled. Reginald had been right. My prey was much better equipped for the journey than I was, with my half a loaf of bread and apples. I cursed myself for not going through the saddlebags of his companion.

'Come on Scratch,' I said. 'Come on, girl.'

For the rest of the day I rode, and the only time I even slowed down was when I retrieved the spyglass from my pocket and scanned the horizon, looking for signs of my quarry. He remained ahead of me. Frustratingly ahead of me. All day. Until, as light began to fade I started becoming concerned I had lost him altogether. I could only hope I was right about his destination.

In the end I had no choice but to rest again for the day, make camp, build a fire, allow Scratch to rest, and pray that I hadn't lost the trail.

And as I sit here I wonder, Why haven't I managed to catch him?

16 July 1747

i

When I woke up this morning it was with a flash of inspiration. Of course. Pointy Ears was a member of Braddock's army and Braddock's army had joined with forces commanded by the Prince of Orange in the Dutch Republic, which was where Pointy Ears should have been. The reason he was hurrying was because …

Because he had absconded and was rushing to get back, presumably before his absence was discovered.

Which meant that his presence in the Black Forest wasn't officially sanctioned. Which meant that Braddock, as his lieutenant-colonel, didn't know about it. Or *probably* didn't know about it.

Sorry, Scratch. I rode her hard again – it would be her third successive day – and noticed the tiredness in her, the fatigue that slowed her down. Even so, it was only around half an hour before we came upon the remains of Pointy Ears' camp and, this time, instead of stopping to test the embers, I urged Scratch on and only let her rest at the next hilltop, where we stopped as we pulled out the spyglass and scanned the area ahead of us, square by square, inch by inch – until I saw him. There he was, a tiny speck riding up the hill opposite, swallowed up by a clump of trees as I watched.

Where were we? I didn't know whether or not we had passed over the border into the Dutch Republic. I hadn't seen another soul for two days, had heard nothing but the sound of Scratch and my own breathing.

That was soon to change. I spurred Scratch and some twenty minutes later was entering the same band of trees I'd seen my quarry disappear into. The first thing I saw was an abandoned cart. Nearby, with flies crawling over sightless eyes, was the body of a horse, the sight of which made Scratch rear slightly, startled. Like me, she had been used to the solitude: just us, the trees, the birds. Here suddenly was the ugly reminder that in Europe one is never far from conflict, never far from war.

We rode on more slowly now, being careful among the trees and whatever other obstacles we might find. Moving onwards, more and more of the foliage was blackened, broken or trampled down. There'd been some action here, that much was certain: I began to see bodies of men, splayed limbs and staring, dead eyes, dark blood and mud rendering the corpses anonymous apart from flashes of uniform: the white of the French army, the blue of the Dutch. I saw broken muskets, snapped bayonets and swords, anything of use having already been salvaged. When I emerged from the tree line we were in a field, the field of battle, where there were even more bodies. Evidently it had been only a small skirmish by the standards of war but, even so, it felt as though death was everywhere.

How long ago it had been I couldn't say with certainty: enough time for scavengers to strip the field of battle but not enough for the bodies to be removed; within the last day, I would have thought, judging by the state of the corpses and the blanket of smoke that still hung over the pasture – a shroud of it, like morning fog but with the heavy yet sharp scent of gunpowder smoke.

Here the mud was thicker, churned up by hooves and feet, and as Scratch began to struggle, I reined her to the side, trying to take us around the perimeter of the field. Then just as she stumbled in the mud and almost pitched me forward over her neck I caught sight of Pointy Ears ahead of us. He was the length of the field away, perhaps half a mile or so, a hazy, almost indistinct figure also struggling in the claggy terrain. His horse must have been as exhausted as mine, because he'd dismounted and was trying to pull it by the reins, his curses carrying faintly across the field.

I pulled out my spyglass to get a better look at him. The last time I'd seen him close up was twelve years ago and he'd been wearing a mask, and I found myself wondering – hoping, even – that my first proper look at him might contain some kind of revelation. Would I recognize him?

No. He was just a man, weathered and grizzled, like his partner had been, filthy and exhausted from his ride. Looking at him now there was no sense of suddenly knowing. Nothing fell into place. He was just a man, a British soldier, same as the one I had killed in the Black Forest.

I saw him crane his neck as he stared through the haze at me. From his coat he produced his own spyglass, and for a moment the two of us studied one another through our telescopes, then I watched as he ran to the muzzle of his horse and with renewed vigour began yanking at the reins, at the same time throwing glances back across the field at me.

He recognized me. Good. Scratch had regained her feet and I pulled her to where the ground was a little harder. At last we were able to make some

headway. In front of me, Pointy Ears was becoming more distinct and I could make out the effort on his face as he pulled out his own horse, then saw the realization dawn on him that he was stuck, and I was gaining on him and would be upon him in a matter of a few short moments.

And then he did the only thing he could do. He dropped the reins and started to run. At the same time the verge around us gave way sharply, and once again Scratch was finding it difficult to keep her feet. With a quick and whispered ‘thank you’ I jumped from her to give chase on foot.

The efforts of the last few days caught up with me in a rush that threatened to engulf me. The mud sucked at my boots, making every step not like running but like wading, and the breath was jagged in my lungs, as though I were inhaling grit. Every muscle screamed in protest and pain at me, begging me not to go on. I could only hope that my friend ahead was having it just as hard, even harder perhaps, because the one thing that spurred me on, the one thing that kept my legs pumping and my chest pulling ragged breaths from the air was the knowledge that I was closing the gap.

He glanced behind and I was close enough to see his eyes widen in fear. He had no mask now. Nothing to hide behind. Despite the pain and exhaustion I grinned at him, feeling dry, parched lips pulling back over my teeth.

He pressed on, grunting with the effort. It had begun to rain, a drizzle that gave the day an extra layer of haze, as though we were stuck inside a landscape coloured in charcoal.

Again he risked another look behind and saw that I was even closer now; this time he stopped and drew his sword, held it in two hands with his shoulders slumped, breathing heavily. He looked exhausted. He looked like a man who’d spent day after day riding hard with little sleep. He looked like a man waiting to be beaten.

But I was wrong; he was luring me forward and, like a fool, I fell for it, and in the next instant was stumbling forward, literally falling as the ground gave way and I waded straight into a vast pool of thick, oozing mud that stopped me in my tracks.

‘Oh, God,’ I said.

My feet disappeared, then my ankles, and before I knew it I was in up to my knees, desperately yanking at my legs, trying to pull them free, while at the same time bracing myself with one hand on the firmer ground around me, trying to keep my sword raised with the other.

My eyes went to Pointy Ears, and it was his turn to grin now as he came forward and brought his sword down in a chopping, two-handed blow that had plenty of force but was clumsy. With a grunt of effort and a ring of steel I met it

and parried, sending him back a couple of steps. Then, as he was off balance, I pulled one of my feet clear of the mud, and my boot, saw my white stocking, filthy as it was, bright compared to the dirt around it.

Seeing his advantage being squandered, Pointy Ears pressed forward again, this time stabbing forward with his sword, and I defended once and then twice. For a second there was only the sound of clashing steel, of grunts and the rain, harder now, slapping into the mud, me silently thanking God his reserves of cunning were exhausted.

Or were they? At last he realized I would be beaten more easily if he moved to the rear of me, but I saw what was on his mind and lashed out with my sword, catching him at the knee just above his boot and sending him crashing back, howling in agony. With a cry of pain and indignity he got to his feet, driven on perhaps by outrage that his victory wasn't being given to him more easily, and kicked out with his good foot.

I caught it with my other hand and twisted it as hard as I could, hard enough to send him spinning and sprawling face first to the mud.

He tried to roll away, but was too slow, or too dazed, and I stabbed downwards with my sword, driving it through the back of his thigh, straight into the ground and spearing him there. At the same time I used the handle as a grip and with a wrench pulled myself from the mud, leaving my second boot behind.

He screamed and twisted, but was held in place by my sword through his leg. My weight on him as I used the sword as leverage to drag myself from the ooze must have been unbearable, and he shrieked in pain and his eyes rolled back in their sockets. Even so, he slashed wildly with his sword and I was unarmed so that, as I flopped on to him, like a badly landed fish, the blade caught me on the side of the neck, opening a cut and letting out blood that felt warm on my skin.

My hands went to his, and suddenly we were grappling for possession of the sword. Grunting and cursing we fought, when from behind I heard something – something that was surely the sound of approaching feet. Then voices. Somebody speaking in Dutch. I cursed.

'No,' said a voice, and I realized it was me.

He must have heard it, too.

'You're too late, Kenway,' he snarled.

The tramping of the feet from behind me. The rain. My own cries of, 'No, no, *no*,' as a voice said, in English, 'You there. Stop at once.'

And I twisted away from Pointy Ears, smacking the wet mud in frustration as I pulled myself upright, ignoring the sound of his harsh and jagged laugh as I rose to meet the troops who appeared from within the fog and rain, trying to bring myself to full height as I said, 'My name is Haytham Kenway, and I am an

associate of Lieutenant-Colonel Edward Braddock. I demand this man be given into my custody.'

The next laugh I heard, I wasn't sure if it came from Pointy Ears, who lay still pinned to the ground, or perhaps from one of the small band of troops who had materialized before me, like wraiths delivered from the field. Of the commander I saw a moustache, a dirty, wet, double-breasted jacket trimmed with sodden braid that had once been the colour gold. I saw him raising something – something that seemed to flash across my eye line – and realized he was striking me with the hilt of the sword an instant before he made contact, and I lost consciousness.

ii

They don't put unconscious men to death. That would not be noble. Not even in an army commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Edward Braddock.

And so the next thing I felt was cold water slapping into my face – or was it an open palm on my face? Either way, I was being rudely awakened, and as my senses returned I spent a moment wondering who I was, where I was …

And why I had a noose around my neck.

And why my arms were tied behind my back.

I was at one end of a platform. To my left were four men, also, like me, with their necks in nooses. As I watched, the man on the far left jerked and juddered, his feet kicking at empty air.

A gasp went up in front of me and I realized that we had an audience. We were no longer in the battlefield but in some smaller pasture where men had assembled. They wore the colours of the British Army and the bearskin hats of the Coldstream Guards, and their faces were ashen. They were here under sufferance, it was clear, forced to watch as the poor unfortunate at the end of the line kicked his last, his mouth open, and the tip of his tongue, bleeding from having been bitten, protruding, his jaw working in to try and gulp air.

He continued to twitch and kick, his body shaking the scaffold, which ran the length of the platform above our heads. I looked up and saw my own noose tied to it, cast my eyes downwards to the wooden stool on which I stood, and saw my feet, my stockinged feet.

There was a hush. Just the sound of the hanged man dying, the creak of the rope and the complaint of the scaffold.

'That's what happens when you're a thief,' screeched the executioner, pointing at him then striding down the platform towards the second man, calling out to

the stock-still crowd, ‘You meet your maker at the end of a rope, orders of Lieutenant-Colonel Braddock.’

‘I know Braddock,’ I shouted suddenly ‘Where is he? Bring him here.’

‘Shut your mouth, you!’ bawled the executioner, his finger pointed, while at the same time his assistant, the man who’d thrown water in my face, came from my right and slapped me again, only this time not to bring me to my senses but to silence me.

I snarled and struggled with the rope tying my hands, but not too vigorously, not enough so that I would overbalance and fall from the stool on which I was so perilously perched.

‘My name is Haytham Kenway,’ I called, the rope digging into my neck.

‘I said, “Shut your mouth!” ’ the executioner roared a second time, and again his assistant struck me, hard enough so that he almost toppled me from the stool. For the first time I caught sight of the soldier strung up to my immediate left and realized who it was. It was Pointy Ears. He had a bandage that was black with blood around his thigh. He regarded me with cloudy, hooded eyes, a slow, sloppy smile on his face.

By now the executioner had reached the second man in the line.

‘This man is a deserter,’ he screeched. ‘He left his comrades to die. Men like you. He left *you* to die. Tell me, what should his punishment be?’

Without much enthusiasm, the men called back, ‘Hang him.’

‘If you say so,’ smirked the executioner, and he stepped back, planted his foot in the small of the condemned man’s back and pushed, savouring the revolted reaction of the watching men.

I shook the pain of the assistant’s blow from my head and continued to struggle just as the executioner reached the next man, asking the crowd the same question, receiving the same muted, dutiful reply then pushing the poor wretch to his death. The platform quaked and shook as the three men jerked on the end of the ropes. Above my head the scaffold creaked and groaned, and glancing up I saw joints briefly part before coming back together.

Next the executioner reached Pointy Ears.

‘This man – this man enjoyed a small *sojourn* in the Black Forest and thought he could sneak back undetected, but he is wrong. Tell me, how should he be punished?’

‘Hang him,’ mumbled the crowd unenthusiastically.

‘Do you think he should die?’ cried the executioner.

‘Yes,’ replied the crowd. But I saw some of them surreptitiously shaking their heads no, and there were others, drinking from leather flasks, who looked happier about the whole affair, the way you might if you were being bribed with

ale. Indeed, did that account for Pointy Ears' apparent stupor? He was still smiling, even when the executioner moved behind him and planted his foot in the small of his back.

'It's time to hang a deserter!' he shouted, and shoved at the same time as I cried, '*No!* ' and thrashed at my bonds, desperately trying to break free. 'No, he must be kept alive! Where is Braddock? Where is Lieutenant-Colonel Edward Braddock?'

The executioner's assistant appeared before my eyes, grinning through a scratchy beard, with hardly a tooth in his mouth, 'Didn't you hear the man? He said "Shut your mouth." ' And he pulled back his fist to punch me.

He didn't get the chance. My legs shot out, knocked the stool away and in the next instant were locked around the assistant's neck, crossed at the ankle – and tightening.

He yelled. I squeezed harder. His yell became a strangulated choke and his face began to flush as his hands went to my calves, trying to prise them apart. I wrenched from side to side, shaking him like a dog with prey in its jaws, almost taking him off his feet, straining my thigh muscles at the same time as I tried to keep the weight off the noose at my neck. Still, at my side, Pointy Ears thrashed on the end of his rope. His tongue poked from between his lips and his milky eyes bulged, as if about to burst from his skull.

The executioner had moved to the other end of the platform, where he was pulling on the legs of the hanged men to make sure they were dead, but the commotion at the other end caught his attention and he looked up to see his assistant trapped in the vice grip of my legs then came dashing up the platform towards us, cursing at the same time as he reached to draw his sword.

With a shout of effort, I twisted my body and wrenched my legs, pulling the assistant with me and by some miracle timing it just right so that his body slammed into the executioner as he arrived. With a shout the executioner tumbled messily from the platform.

In front of us the men were standing, open-mouthed with shock, none moving to get involved.

I squeezed my legs even more tightly together and was rewarded with a cracking, crunching sound that came from the assistant's neck. Blood began pouring from his nose. His grip on my arms began to slacken. Again I twisted. Again I shouted as my muscles protested and I wrenched him, this time to the other side, where I slammed him into the scaffold.

The shaking, creaking, coming-apart scaffold.

It creaked and complained some more. With a final effort – I had no more strength left, and if this didn't work then here was where I died – I rammed the

man into the scaffold again and, this time, at last, it gave. At the same time as I began to feel myself black out, as though a dark veil were being brought across my mind, I felt the pressure at my neck suddenly relax as the support crashed to the ground in front of the platform, the crossbar toppled, then the platform itself gave way with the sudden weight of men and wood, falling in on itself with a splintering and crashing of disintegrating wood.

My last thought before I lost consciousness was, *Please let him be alive*, and my first words on regaining consciousness inside the tent where I now lie were, 'Is he alive?'

iii

'Is who alive?' asked the doctor, who had a distinguished-looking moustache and an accent that suggested he was higher born than most.

'The pointy-eared man,' I said, and tried to raise myself upright, only to find his hand on my chest guiding me back down to a lying position.

'I'm afraid I haven't the foggiest idea what you're talking about,' he said, not unkindly. 'I hear that you are acquainted with the lieutenant-colonel. Perhaps he will be able to explain everything to you when he arrives in the morning.'

Thus, I now sit here, writing up the events of the day, and awaiting my audience with Braddock …

17 July 1747

He looked like a larger, smarter version of his men, with all of the bearing that his rank implied. His shining black boots were up to the knee. He wore a frock coat with white trim over a dark, buttoned-up tunic, a white scarf at his neck, and on a thick brown leather belt at his waist hung his sword.

His hair was pulled back and tied with a black ribbon. He tossed his hat to a small table at the side of the bed where I lay, put his hands to his hips and regarded me with that deep, colourless gaze I knew well.

'Kenway,' he said simply, 'Reginald did not send word that you were due to be joining me here.'

'It was a spur-of-the-moment decision, Edward,' I said, suddenly feeling young in his presence, intimidated almost.

'I see,' he said. 'You thought you'd just drop in, did you?'

'How long have I been here?' I asked. 'How many days have passed?'

'Three,' replied Braddock. 'Dr Tennant was concerned you might develop a fever. According to him, a feebler man may not have been able to fight it off. You're lucky to be alive, Kenway. Not every man gets to escape both the gallows *and* a fever. Fortunate for you, too, that I was informed about one of the men to be hanged calling for me personally; otherwise my men might well have finished the job. You see how we punish wrongdoers.'

I put my hand to my neck, which was bandaged from the fight with Pointy Ears and still painful from the rope burn. 'Yes, Edward, I have had first-hand experience of how you treat your men.'

He sighed, waved away Dr Tennant, who retired, closing the flaps of the tent behind him, then sat heavily, putting one boot to the bed as though to stake his claim on it. 'Not my men, Kenway. *Criminals*. You were delivered to us by the Dutch in the company of a deserter, a man who had gone absent with a companion. Naturally, you were assumed to be the companion.'

'And what of him, Edward? What of the man I was with?'

'This is the man you've been asking about, is it? The one Dr Tennant tells me you're especially interested in, a – what did he say now? –"a pointy-eared man"?' He couldn't keep the sneer out of his voice as he said it.

‘That man, Edward – he was there the night of the attack on my home. He’s one of the men we have been seeking these last twelve years.’ I looked at him hard. ‘And I find him enlisted in *your* army.’

‘Indeed – in my army. And what of it?’

‘A coincidence, don’t you think?’

Braddock always wore a scowl, but now it deepened. ‘Why don’t you forget the insinuations, boy, and tell me what’s really on your mind. Where *is* Reginald, by the way?’

‘I left him in the Black Forest. No doubt he’s halfway home by now.’

‘To continue his research into myths and folk tales?’ said Braddock with a contemptuous flick of his eyes. Him doing that made me feel strangely loyal to Reginald and his investigations, despite my own misgivings.

‘Reginald believes that if we were able to unlock the secrets of the storehouse, the Order would be the most powerful it has been since the Holy Wars, perhaps ever. We would be poised to rule completely.’

He gave a slightly tired, disgusted look. ‘If you really believe that then you’re as foolish and idealistic as he is. We don’t need magic and tricks to persuade people to our cause, we need steel.’

‘Why not use both?’ I reasoned.

He leaned forward. ‘Because one of them is a rank waste of time, that’s why.’

I met his gaze. ‘That’s as maybe. However I don’t think the best way to win men’s hearts and minds is to execute them, do you?’

‘Again. Scum.’

‘And has he been put to death?’

‘Your friend with – sorry, what was it? –“pointy ears”?’

‘Your ridicule means nothing to me, Edward. Your ridicule means as much to me as your respect, which is nothing. You may think you tolerate me only because of Reginald – well, I can assure you the feeling is entirely mutual. Now, tell me, the pointy-eared man, is he dead?’

‘He died on the scaffold, Kenway. He died the death he deserved.’

I closed my eyes and for a second lay there aware of nothing but my own … what? Some evil, boiling broth of grief, anger and frustration; of mistrust and doubt. Aware, also, of Braddock’s foot on my bed and wishing I could lash out with a sword and purge him from my life for ever.

That was his way, though, wasn’t it? It wasn’t my way.

‘So he was there that night, was he?’ asked Braddock, and did he have a slightly mocking tone in his voice? ‘He was one of those responsible for killing your father, and all of this time he’s been among us, and we never knew. A bitter irony, wouldn’t you say, Haytham?’

‘Indeed. An irony or a coincidence.’

‘Be careful, boy, there’s no Reginald here to talk you out of trouble now, you know.’

‘What was his name?’

‘Like hundreds of men in my army his name was Tom Smith – Tom Smith of the country; much more about them we don’t know. On the run, probably from the magistrates, or perhaps having killed his landlord’s son in a duel, or deflowered a landowner’s daughter, or perhaps romped with his wife. Who’s to say? We don’t ask questions. If you were to ask does it surprise me that one of the men we hunted was here among my army all of the time, then my answer would be no.’

‘Did he have associates in the army? Somebody that I could talk to?’

Slowly, Braddock took his foot from my cot. ‘As a fellow Knight you are free to enjoy my hospitality here and you may of course conduct your own enquiries. I hope that in return I can also call upon your assistance in our endeavours.’

‘And what may they be?’ I asked.

‘The French have laid siege to the fortress of Bergen op Zoom. Inside are our allies: the Dutch, Austrians, Hanoverian and Hessians, and of course the British. The French have already opened the trenches and are digging a second set of parallel trenches. They will soon begin their bombardment of the fortress. They will be trying to take it before the rains. They think it will give them a gateway to the Netherlands, and the Allies feel that the fortress must be held at all costs. We need every man we can get. You see now why we do not tolerate deserters. Do you have a heart for the battle, Kenway, or are you so focused on revenge that you cannot help us any more?’

Part Three

1753, Six Years Later

7 June 1753

i

‘I have a job for you,’ said Reginald.

I nodded, expecting as much. It had been a long time since I’d last seen him and I’d had the feeling that his request to meet wasn’t just an excuse to catch up on tittle-tattle, even if the venue was White’s, where we sat supping an ale each, an attentive and – it hadn’t escaped my notice – buxom waitress keen to bring us more.

To the left of us a table of gentlemen – the infamous ‘gamesters of White’s’ – were playing a rowdy game of dice, but otherwise the house was empty.

I hadn’t seen him since that day in the Black Forest, six years ago, and a lot had happened since. Joining Braddock in the Dutch Republic, I’d served with the Coldstreams at the Siege of Bergen op Zoom, then until the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle the following year, which marked the end of that war. After that I’d remained with them on several peace-keeping campaigns, which had kept me away from Reginald, whose correspondence arrived either from London or from the chateau in the Landes Forest. Aware that my own letters could be read before they were sent, I’d kept my correspondence vague while privately looking forward to the moment I could at last sit down with Reginald and talk over my fears.

But, returning to London, and once again taking up residence at Queen Anne’s Square, I found he was not available. That was what I was told: he had been sequestered with his books – he and John Harrison, another Knight of the Order, and one who seemingly was as obsessed with temples, ancient storehouses and ghostly beings from the past as he was.

‘Do you remember we came here for my eighth birthday?’ I said, wanting, somehow, to put off the moment when I learnt the identity of the person I would have to kill. ‘Do you remember what happened outside, the hot-headed suitor prepared to dispense summary justice on the street?’

He nodded. ‘People change, Haytham.’

‘Indeed – you have. You’ve been mainly preoccupied with your investigations into the first civilization,’ I said.

‘I’m so close now, Haytham,’ he said, as if the thought of it shrugged off a weary shroud he’d been wearing.

‘Were you ever able to decode Vedomir’s journal?’

He frowned. ‘No, worse luck, and not for want of trying, I can tell you. Or should I say “not yet”, because there is a code-breaker, an Italian Assassin affiliate – a woman, would you believe? We have her at the French chateau, deep within the forest, but she says she needs her son to help her decode the book, and her son has been missing these past few years. Personally, I doubt what she says and think she could very well decode the journal herself if she chose. I think she’s using us to help reunite her with her son. But she has agreed to work on the journal if we locate him and, finally, we have.’

‘Where?’

‘Where you will soon be going to recover him: Corsica.’

So I’d been wrong. Not an assassination, a babysitting job.

‘What?’ he said, at the look on my face. ‘You think it below you? Quite the opposite, Haytham. This is the most important task I have ever given you.’

‘No, Reginald,’ I sighed, ‘it’s not; it simply appears that way in your thinking.’

‘Oh? What are you saying?’

‘That perhaps your interest in this has meant you have neglected affairs elsewhere. Perhaps you have let certain other matters become out of control …’

Perplexed, he said, ‘What “matters”?’

‘Edward Braddock.’

He looked surprised. ‘I see. Well, is there something you want to tell me about him? Something you’ve been keeping from me?’

I indicated for more ales and our waitress brought them over, set them down with a smile then walked away with her hips swaying.

‘What has Braddock told you of his movements in recent years?’ I asked Reginald.

‘I have heard very little from him, seen him even less,’ he replied. ‘In the last six years we’ve met just once, as far as I can recall and his correspondences have become increasingly sporadic. He disapproves of my interest in Those Who Came Before and, unlike you, has not kept his objections to himself. It appears we differ greatly on how best to spread the Templar message. As a result, no, I know very little of him; in fact, if I wanted to know about Edward, I dare say I’d ask someone who has been with him during his campaigns –’ He gave a sardonic look. ‘Where might I find such a person, do you think?’

‘You’d be a fool to ask me,’ I chortled. ‘You know full well that, where Braddock is concerned, I’m not an especially impartial observer. I began by disliking the man and now like him even less, but in the absence of any more objective observations, here’s mine: he has become a tyrant.’

‘How so?’

‘Cruelty, mainly. To the men suffering under him, but also to innocents. I’ve seen it with my own eyes, for the first time, in the Dutch Republic.’

‘How Edward treats his men is his business,’ said Reginald with a shrug. ‘Men respond to discipline, Haytham, you know that.’

I shook my head. ‘There was one particular incident, Reginald, on the last day of the siege.’

Reginald settled back to listen: ‘Go on …’; as I continued.

‘We were retreating. Dutch soldiers were shaking their fists at us, cursing King George for not sending more of his men to help relieve the fortress. Why more men had not arrived I don’t know. Would they have even made any difference? Again, I don’t know. I’m not sure any of us who were stationed within those pentagonal walls knew how to contend with a French onslaught that was as committed as it was brutal, and as ruthless as it was sustained.

‘Braddock had been right: the French had dug their parallel trench lines and begun their bombardment of the city, pressing close to the fortress walls, and they were on them by September, when they dug mines beneath the fortifications and destroyed them.

‘We made attacks outside the walls to try to break the siege, all to no avail until, on 18 September, the French broke through – at four in the morning, if memory serves. They caught the Allied forces quite literally napping, and we were overrun before we knew it. The French were slaughtering the entire garrison. We know, of course, that eventually they broke free of their command and inflicted even worse damage on the poor inhabitants of that town, but the carnage had already begun. Edward had secured a skiff at the port, and had long since decided that, were a day to come when the French broke through, he would use it to evacuate his men. That day had arrived.

‘A band of us made our way to the port, where we began to oversee the loading of men and supplies on to the skiff. We kept a small force at the port walls to keep any marauding French troops back, while Edward, I and others stood by the gangplank, overseeing the loading of men and supplies on to the skiff. We took some fourteen hundred men to the fortress at Bergen op Zoom, but the months of fighting had depleted numbers by about half. There was room on the skiff. Not lots of it – it wasn’t as though we could have taken a great many passengers; certainly not the numbers who needed to evacuate from the

fortress – but there was space.' I looked hard at Reginald. 'We could have taken them, is what I'm saying.'

'Could have taken whom, Haytham?'

I took a long pull on my ale. 'There was a family who approached us on the port. Included in their number was an old man who could barely walk, as well as children. From among them came a young man, who approached us and asked me if we had room on the boat. I nodded yes – I saw no reason why not – and indicated to Braddock, but instead of waving them aboard as I expected, he held up a hand and ordered them off the port, beckoning his men to board the boat more quickly. The young man was as surprised as I was, and I opened my mouth to protest, but he got there before me; his face darkened and he said something to Braddock that I didn't catch, but was obviously an insult of some kind.

'Braddock told me later that the insult was "craven". Hardly the most insulting affront, certainly not worth what happened next, which was that Braddock drew his sword and plunged it into the young man where he stood.

'Braddock kept a small party of the men nearby at most times. His two regular companions were the executioner, Slater, and his assistant – his new assistant, I should say. I killed the old one. These men, you might almost have called them bodyguards. Certainly they were much closer to him than I was. Whether or not they had his ear I couldn't say, but they were fiercely loyal and protective and were rushing forward even as the young man's body fell. They set about the family, Reginald, Braddock and these two of his men, and cut them down, every single one of them: the two men, an older woman, a younger woman, and of course the children, one of them an infant, one of them a babe in arms …' I felt my jaw clench. 'It was a bloodbath, Reginald, the worst atrocity of war I have seen – and I'm afraid I've seen a great many.'

He nodded gravely. 'I see. Naturally, this hardened your heart against Edward.'

I scoffed. 'Of course – of course it has. We are all men of war, Reginald, but we are not barbarians.'

'I see, I see.'

'Do you? Do you see at last? That Braddock is out of control?'

'Steady on, Haytham. "Out of control"? The red mist descending is one thing. "Out of control" is quite another.'

'He treats his men like slaves, Reginald.'

He shrugged. 'So? They're British soldiers – they expect to be treated like slaves.'

'I think he is moving away from us. These men he has serving him, they're not Templars, they're free agents.'

Reginald nodded. ‘The two men in the Black Forest. Were these men part of Braddock’s inner circle?’

I looked at him. I watched him very carefully as I lied: ‘I don’t know.’

There was a long pause and, to avoid meeting his eye, I took a long drink on my ale and pretended to admire the waitress, pleased to have the subject changed when Reginald at last leaned forward to give me more details of my forthcoming journey to Corsica.

ii

Reginald and I parted outside White’s and went to our carriages. When my carriage was some distance away I tapped on the ceiling to stop, and my driver climbed down, looked left and right to check that nobody was watching, then opened the door and joined me inside. He sat opposite me and removed his hat, placing it to the seat beside him and regarding me with bright, curious eyes.

‘Well, Master Haytham?’ he said.

I looked at him, took a deep breath and stared out of the window. ‘I’m due to leave by sea tonight. We will return to Queen Anne’s Square, where I will pack, then straight to the docks, if you would.’

He doffed an imaginary cap. ‘At your service, Mr Kenway, sir, I’m getting quite used to this driving lark. Lots of waiting around, mind, could do without all that, but otherwise, well, at least you ain’t got Frenchmen shooting at you, or your own officers shooting at you. In fact, I’d say the lack of blokes shooting at you is a real perk of the job.’

He could be quite tiresome sometimes. ‘Quite so, Holden,’ I said, with a frown that was intended to shut him up, although chance would be a fine thing.

‘Well, anyway, sir, did you learn anything?’

‘I’m afraid nothing concrete.’

I looked out of the window, wrestling with feelings of doubt, guilt and disloyalty, wondering if there was anyone I truly trusted – anyone to whom I remained truly loyal now.

Ironically, the person I trusted most was Holden.

I had met him while in the Dutch Republic. Braddock had been as good as his word and allowed me to move among his men, asking them if they knew anything of the ‘Tom Smith’ who had met his end on the scaffold, but I wasn’t surprised when my investigations proved fruitless. No man I asked would even admit to knowing this Smith, if indeed Smith was his name – until, one night, I heard a movement at the door of my tent and sat up in my cot in time to see a figure appear.

He was young, in his late twenties, with close-cropped, gingery hair and an easy, impish smile. This, it would turn out, was Private Jim Holden, a London man, a good man who wanted to see justice done. His brother had been one of those who had been hanged the same day I almost met my own end. He had been executed for the crime of stealing stew – that was all he had done, steal a bowlful of stew because he was starving; a flogging offence, at worst, but they hanged him. His biggest mistake, it seemed, had been to steal the stew from one of Braddock's own men, one of his private mercenary force.

This was what Holden told me: that the fifteen-hundred-strong force of Coldstream Guards was made up mainly of British Army soldiers like himself, but that there was within that a smaller cadre of men personally selected by Braddock: mercenaries. These mercenaries included Slater and his assistant – and, more worryingly, the two men who had ridden to the Black Forest.

None of these men wore the ring of the Order. They were thugs, strong-arms. I wondered why – why Braddock chose men of this stripe for his inner circle, and not Templar knights? The more time I'd spent with him, the more I thought I had my answer: he was moving away from the Order.

I looked back at Holden now. I had protested that night, but he was a man who had glimpsed the corruption at the heart of Braddock's organization. He was a man who wanted to see justice for his brother and, as a result, no amount of my protesting made the slightest bit of difference. He was going to help me whether I liked it or not.

I had agreed, but on the understanding that his assistance was kept secret at all times. In the hope of hoodwinking those who always seemed one step ahead of me, I needed it to appear as though I'd dropped the matter of finding my father's killers – so that they might no longer be one step ahead of me.

Thus, when we left the Dutch Republic Holden took on the title of my gentleman's gentleman, my driver, and, to all intents and purposes, as far as the outside world was concerned, that's exactly what he was. Nobody knew that in fact he was carrying out investigations on my behalf. Not even Reginald knew that.

Perhaps *especially* not Reginald.

Holden saw the guilt written across my face.

'Sir, it ain't lies you're telling Mr Birch. All you're doing is what he's been doing, which is withholding certain bits of information, just until you've satisfied yourself that his name is clear – and I'm sure it will be, sir. I'm sure it will be, him being your oldest friend, sir.'

'I wish I could share your optimism on the matter, Holden, I really do. Come, we should move on. My errand awaits.'

‘Certainly, sir, and where is that errand taking you, may I ask?’

‘Corsica,’ I said. ‘I’m going to Corsica.’

‘Ah, in the midst of a revolution, so I hear …’

‘Quite right, Holden. A place of conflict is a perfect place to hide.’

‘And what will you be doing there, sir?’

‘I’m afraid I can’t tell you. Suffice to say, it has nothing to do with finding my father’s killers and is therefore of only peripheral interest to me. It’s a job, a duty, nothing more. I hope that, while I’m away, you will continue your own investigations?’

‘Oh, certainly sir.’

‘Excellent. And see to it that they remain covert.’

‘Don’t you be worrying about that, sir. As far as anybody is concerned, Master Kenway has long since abandoned his quest for justice. Whoever it is, sir, their guard will drop eventually.’

25 June 1753

i

It was hot on Corsica during the day, but at night the temperature dropped. Not too much – not freezing – but enough to make lying on a rock-strewn hillside with no blanket an uncomfortable experience.

Cold as it was, though, there were even more pressing matters to attend to, such as the squad of Genoese soldiers moving up the hill, who I'd like to have said were moving stealthily.

I'd like to have said that, but couldn't.

At the top of the hill, on a plateau, was the farmhouse. I'd been keeping watch on it for the past two days, my spyglass trained on the doors and windows of what was a large building and a series of smaller barns and outbuildings, taking note of comings and goings: rebels arriving with supplies and leaving with them, too; while on the first day a small squad of them – I counted eight – had left the complex on what, when they returned, I realized had been some kind of attack: the Corsican rebels, striking out against their Genoese masters. There were only six of them when they came back, and those six looked exhausted and bloodied, but, nevertheless, without words or gestures, wore an aura of triumph.

Women arrived with supplies not long afterwards, and there was celebration far into the night. This morning, more rebels had arrived, with muskets wrapped in blankets. They were well equipped and had support, it seemed; it was no wonder the Genoese wanted to wipe this stronghold off the map.

I had spent the two days moving around the hill so as to avoid being seen. The terrain was rocky and I kept a safe distance away from the buildings. On the morning of the second day, however, I realized I had company. There was another man on the hill, another watcher. Unlike me, he had remained in the same position, dug into an outcrop of rocks, hidden by the brush and the skeletal trees that somehow survived on the otherwise parched hillside.

ii

Lucio was the name of my target, and the rebels were hiding him. Whether they, too, were affiliates of the Assassins, I had no idea, and it didn't matter anyway; he was the one I was after: a 21-year-old boy who was the key to solving a puzzle that has tormented poor Reginald for six years. An unprepossessing-looking boy, with shoulder-length hair, who, as far as I could tell from watching the farmhouse, helped out by carrying pails of water, feeding the livestock and, yesterday, wringing the neck of a chicken.

So he was there: that much I'd established. That was good. But there were problems. Firstly, he had a bodyguard. Never far away from him was a man who wore the gowns and cowl of an Assassin; his gaze would often sweep the hillside while Lucio fetched water or scattered chicken feed. At his waist was a sword, and the fingers of his right hand would flex. Did he wear the famous hidden blade of the Assassins? I wondered. No doubt he would. I'd have to beware of him, that much was for certain; not to mention the rebels who were based at the farmhouse. The compound seemed to be crawling with them.

One other thing to take into account: they were clearly planning to leave soon. Perhaps they'd been using the farmhouse as a temporary base for the attack; perhaps they knew that the Genoese would soon be seeking revenge and come looking for them. Either way, they had been moving supplies into the barns, no doubt piling carts high with them. My guess was that they would leave the next day.

A night-time incursion then, would seem to be the answer. And it had to be tonight. This morning I managed to locate Lucio's sleeping quarters: he shared a medium-sized outhouse with the Assassin and at least six other rebels. They had a code phrase they used when entering the quarters, and I read their lips through my spyglass: *'We work in the dark to serve the light.'*

So – an operation that required some forethought, but, no sooner was I preparing to retire from the hillside in order to concoct my plans, than I saw the second man.

And my plans changed. Edging closer to him, I had managed to identify him as a Genoese soldier. If I was right, that meant he was the forward party of men who would be attempting to take the stronghold; the rest would be along – when?

Sooner, I thought, rather than later. They would want to exact swift revenge for the previous day's raid. Not only that, but they would want to be *seen* to be reacting quickly to the rebels. Tonight, then.

So I left him. I let him continue his surveillance and, instead of withdrawing, stayed on the hillside concocting a different plan. My new plan involved Genoese troops.

The observation man had been good. He'd stayed out of sight and then, when dark fell, retreated stealthily, noiselessly, back down the hill. Where, I wondered, was the rest of the force?

Not far away; and an hour or so later I began to notice movement at the bottom of the hill and even, at one point, heard a muffled curse in Italian. By this stage I was about halfway up and, realizing that they would soon begin to advance, I moved even closer to the plateau and the fence of an animal enclosure. Maybe fifty yards away I could see one of the sentries. Last night, they'd had five altogether, around the entire perimeter of the farmyard. Tonight, they would no doubt increase the guard.

I took out my spyglass and trained it on the nearest guard, who stood, silhouetted by the moon at his back, diligently scanning the hillside below him. Of me, he would see nothing, just another irregular shape in a landscape of irregular shapes. No wonder they were deciding to move so quickly after their ambush. It wasn't the most secure hideout I'd ever seen. In fact, they'd have been sitting ducks were it not for the fact that the approaching Genoese soldiers were so damned clumsy. The conduct of their observation man flattered the operation as a whole. These were men to whom stealth was clearly a foreign and unfamiliar idea, and I was beginning to hear more and more noise from the bottom of the hill. The rebels were almost certain to hear them next. And if the rebels heard them, they would have more than enough opportunity to make their escape. And if the rebels made their escape, they would take Lucio with them.

So I decided to lend a hand. Each guard had responsibility for a pie-slice of the farmyard. Thus, the one nearest to me would move slowly back and forth across a distance of about twenty-five yards. He was good; he made sure that even while he was scanning one section of his area the rest of it was never fully out of sight. But he was also on the move and, when he was, I had a precious few seconds in which to move closer.

So I did. Bit by bit. Until I was close enough to see the guard: his bushy, grey beard, his hat with the brim covering eyes like dark shadows, and his musket slung over his shoulder. And while I couldn't see or hear the marauding Genoese soldiers *yet*, I was aware of them, and soon he would be, too.

I could only assume that the same scene was being played out on the other side of the hill, which meant I had to work fast. I drew my short sword and readied myself. I felt sorry for the guard and offered up a silent apology. He had done nothing to me but be a good and diligent guard and he did not deserve to die.

And then, there on the rocky hillside, I paused. For the first time in my life, I doubted my ability to go through with it. I thought of the family on the port, cut

down by Braddock and his men. Seven senseless deaths. And all of a sudden I was struck by the conviction that I was no longer prepared to add to the death toll. I couldn't put this guard, who was no enemy of mine, to the sword. I couldn't do it.

The hesitation almost cost me dear, because at that same moment the clumsiness of the Genoese soldiers finally made its presence felt, and there were the sounds of clattering rock and a curse from further down the hill that was carried on the night air, first to my ears, then to the sentry.

His head jerked, and straight away he was reaching for his musket, craning his neck as he strained his eyes, staring down the hill. He saw me. For a second our eyes locked. My moment of hesitation was over and I sprang, covering the distance between us in one leap.

I led with my empty right hand outstretched in a claw, and my sword held in my left. As I landed I grabbed the back of his head with my right hand and plunged the sword into his throat. He had been about to alert his comrades, but the shout died to a gurgle as blood gushed over my hand and down his front. Holding his head secure with my right hand, I embraced him then lowered him gently and noiselessly to the dry dirt of the farmyard.

I crouched. About sixty yards away was the second guard. He was a dim figure in the dark, but I could see that he was about to turn and, when he did, he was likely to spot me. I ran – so fast that, for a moment, I could hear the rush of the night, and caught him just as he turned. Again, I took the back of the man's neck with my right hand and slammed the sword into him. Again, the man was dead before he hit the dirt.

From further down the hill I heard more noise from the Genoese assault troop, which was blissfully unaware that I had prevented their advance being heard. Sure enough, though, their comrades on the other side had been just as inept, and without a Kenway guardian angel *had* been heard by the sentries on their side. Straight away the cry went up and, in moments, lights were being lit in the farmhouse and rebels were pouring out carrying lit torches, pulling boots on over their britches, dragging jackets across their backs and passing each other swords and muskets. As I crouched, watching, I saw the doors to a barn thrown open and two men begin pulling out a cart by hand, already piled high with supplies, while another hurried across with a horse.

The time for stealth was over and the Genoese soldiers on all sides knew it, abandoning their attempts to storm the farm quietly and rushing up the hill towards the farmyard with a shout.

I had an advantage – I was already in the farmyard, plus I was not in the uniform of a Genoese soldier, and in the confusion I was able to move among the

running rebels without attracting suspicion.

I moved towards the outhouse where Lucio was quartered and almost ran into him as he came darting out. His hair was untied but otherwise he was dressed, and he was calling to another man, exhorting him to make his way to the barn. Not far away was the Assassin, who ran, pulling his robes across his chest and pulling his sword at the same time. Two Genoese raiders appeared around the side of the outhouse and straight away he engaged them, calling back over his shoulder, 'Lucio, run for the barn.'

Excellent. Just what I wanted: the Assassin's attention diverted.

Just then I saw another trooper come running on to the plateau, crouch, raise his musket and take aim. Lucio, holding the torch, was his target, but the soldier didn't get a chance to fire before I had darted over and was upon him before he even saw me. He gave a single, muted cry as I buried my sword hilt-deep in the back of his neck.

'Lucio!' I yelled, and at the same time jogged the dead man's trigger finger so that the musket discharged – but harmlessly, into the air. Lucio stopped, shielding his eyes to look across the yard, where I made a show of tossing away the limp corpse of the soldier. Lucio's companion ran on, which was just what I wanted. Some distance away, the Assassin was still fighting, and for a second I admired his skills as he fended off the two men at the same time.

'Thank you,' called Lucio.

'Wait,' I responded. 'We've got to get out of here before the farmyard's overrun.'

He shook his head. 'I need to make my way to the cart,' he called; 'Thank you again, friend.' Then he turned and darted off.

Damn. I cursed and took off in the direction of the barn, running parallel to him but out of sight in the shadows. To my right I saw a Genoese raider about to come off the hillside and into the yard and was close enough to see his eyes widen as our gaze met. Before he could react, I'd grabbed his arm, span and thrust my sword into his armpit, just above his chest plate, and let him fall, screaming, backwards to the rock, snatching his torch at the same time. I kept going, staying parallel with Lucio, making sure he was out of danger. I reached the barn just ahead of him. As I passed by, still in the shadows, I could see inside the still-open front doors, where two rebels were tethering a horse to the cart while two stood guard, one firing his musket while the other reloaded then knelt to fire. I continued running then darted close to the wall of the barn, where I found a Genoese soldier about to let himself in through a side door. I thrust the sword blade upwards at the base of his spine. For a second he writhed in agony,

impaled on the blade, and I shoved his body through the door ahead of me, tossed the lit torch into the back of the cart and stayed back in the shadows.

'Get them!' I called, in what I hoped was an approximation of the voice and accent of a Genoese soldier. 'Get the rebel scum.'

Then: 'The cart's ablaze!' I shouted, this time in what I hoped was an approximation of the voice and accent of a Corsican rebel, and at the same time I moved forward out of the shadows, clasping my Genoese corpse, and let him drop as though he were a fresh kill.

'The cart's ablaze!' I repeated, and now turned my attention to Lucio, who had just arrived at the barn. 'We've got to get out of here. Lucio, come with me.'

I saw two of the rebels exchange a confused look, each wondering who I was and what I wanted with Lucio. There was the report of musket fire, and wood splintered around us. One of the rebels fell, a musket ball embedded in his eye, and I dived on the other one, pretending to shield him from the musket fire but punching the knife blade into his heart at the same time. It was Lucio's companion, I realised, as he died.

'He's gone,' I said to Lucio, rising.

'No!' he shouted, tearful already. No wonder they'd considered him fit only for feeding livestock, I thought, if he was going to dissolve into tears the first time a comrade was killed in action.

By now the barn was ablaze around us. The other two rebels, seeing that there was nothing they could salvage, made their escape and ran pell-mell across the yard towards the hillside, melting into the dark. Other rebels were making their escape, and across the yard I saw that Genoese soldiers had put torches to farm buildings as well.

'I must wait for Miko,' called Lucio.

I gambled that Miko was his Assassin bodyguard. 'He's otherwise engaged. He asked me, a fellow member of the Brotherhood, to take care of you.'

'Are you sure?'

'A good Assassin questions everything,' I said. 'Miko has taught you well. But now is not the time for lessons in the tenets of our creed. We must go.'

He shook his head. 'Tell me the code phrase,' he said firmly.

'Freedom to choose.'

And at last I seemed to have established enough trust to persuade Lucio to come with me, and we began to make our way down the hillside; me, gleeful, thanking God that at last I had him; him, not so sure. Suddenly, he stopped.

'No,' he said, shaking his head. 'I can't do it – I can't leave Miko.'

Great, I thought.

‘He said to go,’ I replied, ‘and to meet him at the boom of the ravine, where our horses are tethered.’

Behind us at the farmyard, the fires raged on and I could hear the remnants of the battle. The Genoese soldiers were clearing up the last of the rebels. Not far away was the sound of a clattering stone, and I saw other figures in the darkness: a pair of rebels escaping. Lucio saw them, too, and went to call to them, but I clamped a hand over his mouth.

‘No, Lucio,’ I whispered. ‘The soldiers will be after them.’

His eyes were wide. ‘These are my comrades. They are my friends. I need to be with them. We need to ensure that Miko is safe.’

From high above us drifted the sound of pleading and screaming, and Lucio’s eyes darted as though trying to deal with the conflict in his head: did he help his friends above or join those escaping? Either way, I could see he had decided that he didn’t want to be with me.

‘Stranger …’ he began, and I thought, ‘Stranger’, now, eh?

‘I thank you for all that you have done to help me and I hope that we can meet again in happier circumstances – perhaps when I can express my gratitude even more thoroughly – but at the moment I’m needed with my people.’

He stood up to go. With a hand on his shoulder I brought him down to my level again. He pulled away with his jaw set. ‘Now, Lucio,’ I said, ‘listen. I’ve been sent by your mother to take you to her.’

At this he reared back. ‘Oh no,’ he said. ‘No, no, no.’

Which wasn’t the reaction I’d been expecting.

I had to scramble across rock to catch him up. But he began to fight me off. ‘No, no,’ he said. ‘I don’t know who you are, just leave me alone.’

‘Oh, for the love of God,’ I said, and silently admitted defeat as I grabbed him in a sleeper hold, ignoring his struggles and applying pressure, restricting the flow of his carotid artery; not enough to cause him permanent damage but enough to render him unconscious.

And as I threw him over my shoulder – a tiny slip of a thing, he was – and carried him down the hill, careful to avoid the last pockets of rebels fleeing the Genoese attack, I wondered why I hadn’t simply knocked him out in the first place.

iii

I stopped at the ravine edge and lowered Lucio to the floor, then found my rope, secured it and lowered it into the darkness below. Next I used Lucio’s belt to tie

his hands, looped the other end under his thighs and tied it so that his limp body was slung across my back. Then I began the slow climb down.

About halfway down, the weight became unbearable, but it was an eventuality I'd prepared for, and I managed to hang on until I reached an opening in the cliff face that led into a dark cave. I scrambled in and pulled Lucio off my back, feeling my muscles relax gratefully.

From ahead of me, in the cave, came a noise. A movement at first, like a shifting sound, and then a click.

The sound an Assassin's hidden blade makes when it is engaged.

'I knew you'd come here,' said a voice – a voice that belonged to Miko, the Assassin. 'I knew you'd come here, because that's what I would have done.'

And then he struck, came shooting forward from within the cave, using my shock and surprise against me. I was already drawing my short sword and had it out as we clashed, his blade slicing at me like a claw and meeting my sword with such force that it was knocked out of my hand, sent skittering to the lip of the cave, and into the blackness below.

My sword. My father's sword.

But there was no time to mourn it, for the Assassin was coming at me a second time and he was good, very good. In a confined space, with no weapon, I had no chance. All I had, in fact, was …

Luck.

And luck is all it was, that, as I pressed myself against the cave wall, he had miscalculated slightly, enough to overbalance a fraction. In any other circumstances, against any other opponent, he would have recovered immediately and finished his kill – but this wasn't any other circumstances and I wasn't any other opponent, and I made him pay for his tiny error. I leaned into him, grabbed his arm, twisted and helped him on his way, so that he, too, sailed out into the blackness. But he held on, pulled me with him, dragged me to the edge of the cave so that I was screaming in pain as I tried to stop myself being dragged out into open space. Lying flat on my belly, I looked out and saw him, one arm grabbing mine, the other trying to reach for the rope. I could feel the brace of his hidden blade, brought my other hand forward and began fumbling with the fastenings. Too late he realized what I was doing and abandoned trying to catch hold of the rope, instead focusing his efforts on trying to stop me unfastening the brace. For some moments our hands flapped at each other for possession of the blade, which, as I opened the first catch, suddenly slipped further up his wrist and sent him lurching to one side, his position even more precarious than before, his other arm pinwheeling. It was all I needed, and with a final shout of effort I unclipped the last fastening, wrenched the brace free and at

the same time bit into the hand that gripped my wrist. A combination of pain and lack of traction was enough to dislodge him at last.

I saw him swallowed up by the dark and prayed he wouldn't hit my horse when he landed. But nothing came. No sound of a landing, nothing. The next thing I saw was the rope, taut and quivering, and I craned my neck, strained my eyes to search the darkness and was rewarded by the sight of Miko, some distance below, very much alive, and beginning to climb up towards me.

I pulled his blade to me and held it to the rope.

'If you climb much higher the fall will kill you when I cut the rope,' I called. He was already close enough so that I could look into his eyes when he stared up at me, and I could see the indecision in them. 'You shouldn't suffer such a death, friend,' I added. 'Start your descent and live to fight another day.'

I began to saw slowly at the rope, and he stopped, looked down into the dark, where the bottom of the ravine was not in sight.

'You have my blade,' he said.

'To the victor the spoils.' I shrugged.

'Perhaps we will meet again,' he said, 'and I can reclaim it.'

'I sense that only one of us will survive a second meeting,' I said.

He nodded. 'Perhaps,' he said, and soon had shimmied down into the night.

The fact that I now had to climb back up, and had been forced to surrender my horse, was awkward. But rather that than face the Assassin again.

And for now we are resting. Well, I am resting; poor Lucio remains unconscious. Later, I will hand him over to associates of Reginald, who will take him in a covered wagon, make the passage across the Mediterranean to the South of France and then to the chateau, where Lucio will be reunited with his mother, the code-breaker.

Then I'll charter a ship to Italy, being sure to be seen doing it, referring to my 'young companion' once or twice. If and when the Assassins come looking for Lucio, that's where they'll concentrate their efforts.

Reginald says I'm no longer needed after that. I am to melt away in Italy, leave no trace, no trail to follow.

12 August 1753

i

I began the day in France, having doubled back from Italy. No small undertaking; it's all very well writing it down, but one doesn't simply 'double back' from Italy to France. My reason for being in Italy was to misdirect the Assassins when they came looking for Lucio. So, by returning to France, to the very place where we were holding Lucio and his mother, I was endangering not just my recently accomplished mission but everything Reginald had been working for these past years. It was risky. It was so risky, in fact, that if I thought about it, the risk took my breath away. It made me wonder, was I stupid? What kind of fool would take such a risk?

And the answer was, a fool with doubt in his heart.

ii

One hundred yards or so from the gate, I came upon a lone patrol, a guard dressed as a peasant, with a musket slung across his back, who looked sleepy, but was alert and watchful. As we drew up to him our eyes met for a moment. His flickered briefly as he recognized me, and he jerked his head slightly to let me know I was free to pass. There would be another patrol, I knew, on the other side of the chateau. We came out of the forest and followed the tall perimeter wall until we came to a large, arched wooden gate inset with a smaller wicket gate, where a guard stood, a man I recognized from my years spent at the chateau.

'Well, well,' he said, 'if it isn't Master Haytham, all grown up.' He grinned and took the reins of my horses as I dismounted, before opening the wicket gate, which I stepped through, blinking in the sudden sunlight after the comparative gloom of the forest.

Ahead of me stretched the chateau lawn, and walking across it I felt a strange crawling sensation in my belly that I knew to be nostalgia for the time I had spent at this chateau in my youth, when Reginald had …

… continued my father's teachings? He'd said so. But of course I now know he'd been misleading me about that. In the ways of combat and stealth, perhaps, he had done so, but Reginald had raised me in the ways of the Templar order, and taught me that the way of the Templar was the *only* way; and that those who believed in another way were at best misguided, at worst evil.

But I'd since learnt that Father was one of those misguided, evil people, and who's to say what he would have taught me as I grew up. Who's to say?

The grass was straggly and overgrown, despite the presence of two gardeners, both of whom wore short swords at their waists, hands going to the hilts as I made my way towards the front door of the chateau. I came close to one of them, who, when he saw who I was, nodded his head. 'An honour finally to meet you, Master Kenway,' he said. 'I trust your mission was successful?'

'It was, thank you, yes,' I replied to the guard – or gardener, whatever he was. To him I was a knight, one of the most celebrated in the Order. Could I really hate Reginald when his stewardship had brought me such acclaim? And, after all, had I ever doubted his teachings? The answer was no. Had I been *forced* to follow them? Again, no. I'd always had the option to choose my own path but had stayed with the Order because I believed in the code.

Even so, he has lied to me.

No, not lied to me. How had Holden put it? 'Withheld the truth'.

Why?

And, more immediately, why had Lucio reacted that way when I told him he was to see his mother?

At the mention of my name, the second gardener looked at me more sharply, then he too was genuflecting as I made my way past, acknowledging him with a nod, feeling taller all of a sudden and all but puffing out my chest as I approached the front door that I knew so well. I turned before I knocked, to look back across the lawn, where the two guards stood watching me. I had trained on that lawn, spent countless hours honing my sword skills.

I knocked, and the door was opened by yet another similarly attired man who also wore a short sword at his waist. The chateau had never been this fully staffed when I had lived here, but then again, when I lived here, we never had a guest as important as the code-breaker.

The first familiar face I saw belonged to John Harrison, who looked at me then did a double take. 'Haytham,' he blustered, 'what the hell are you doing here?'

'Hello, John,' I said equably, 'is Reginald here?'

'Well, yes, Haytham, but Reginald is *supposed* to be here. What are *you* doing here?'

‘I came to check on Lucio.’

‘You what?’ Harrison was becoming somewhat red-faced. ‘You “came to check on Lucio”?’ He was having trouble finding his words now. ‘What? Why? What on earth do you think you’re doing?’

‘John,’ I said gently, ‘please calm yourself. I was not followed from Italy. Nobody knows I’m here.’

‘Well, I should bloody well hope not.’

‘Where’s Reginald?’

‘Below stairs, with the prisoners.’

‘Oh? Prisoners?’

‘Monica and Lucio.’

‘I see. I had no idea they were considered prisoners.’

But a door had opened beneath the stairs, and Reginald appeared. I knew that door; it led down to the cellar, which, when I lived there, was a dank, low-ceilinged room, with mouldering, mainly empty wine racks along one side and a dark, damp wall along the other.

‘Hello, Haytham,’ said Reginald, tight-lipped. ‘You were not expected.’

Not far away lingered one of the guards, and now he was joined by another. I looked from them back to Reginald and John, who stood like a pair of concerned clergyman. Neither was armed, but even if they had been, I thought I could probably take all four. If it came to it.

‘Indeed,’ I said, ‘John was just telling me how surprised he was by my visit.’

‘Well, quite. You’ve been very reckless, Haytham …’

‘Perhaps, but I wanted to see that Lucio was being looked after. Now I’m told he is a prisoner here, so perhaps I have my answer.’

Reginald chortled. ‘Well, what did you expect?’

‘What I was told. That the mission was to reunite mother and son; that the code-breaker had agreed to work on Vedomir’s journal if we were able to rescue her son from the rebels.’

‘I told you no lies, Haytham. Indeed, Monica has been working on decoding the journal since being reunited with Lucio.’

‘Just not on the basis I imagined.’

‘The carrot doesn’t work, we use the stick,’ said Reginald, his eyes cold. ‘I’m sorry if you had formed the impression that there was more carrot than stick involved.’

‘Let’s see her,’ I said, and with a short nod, Reginald agreed. He turned and led us through the door, which opened on to a flight of stone steps leading down. Light danced on the walls.

‘Regarding the journal, we’re close now, Haytham,’ he said as we descended. ‘So far, we’ve been able to establish that there exists an amulet. Somehow it fits with the storehouse. If we can get hold of the amulet …’

At the bottom of the steps, iron cressets on poles had been set out to light the way to a door, where a guard stood. He moved to one side and opened the door for us to pass through. Inside, the cellar was as I remembered it, lit by the flickering light of torches. At one end was a desk. It was bolted to the floor and Lucio was manacled to it, and beside him was his mother, who was an incongruous sight. She sat on a chair that looked as though it had been brought into the cellar from upstairs especially for the purpose. She was wearing long skirts and a buttoned-up blouse and would have looked like a churchgoer were it not for the rusting iron restraints around her wrists and the arms of the chair, and especially the scold’s bridle around her head.

Lucio swivelled in his seat, saw me and his eyes burned with hatred, then he turned back to his work.

I had stopped in the middle of the floor, halfway between the door and the code-breakers. ‘Reginald, what is the meaning of this?’ I said, pointing at Lucio’s mother, who regarded me balefully from within the scold’s bridle.

‘The branks is temporary, Haytham. Monica has been somewhat vocal in her condemnation of our tactics this morning. Hence we have moved them here for the day.’ He raised his voice to address the code-breakers, ‘I’m sure they can return to their usual residence tomorrow, when they have recovered their manners.’

‘This is not right, Reginald.’

‘Their usual quarters are much more pleasant, Haytham,’ he assured me testily.

‘Even so, they should not be treated this way.’

‘Neither should the poor child in the Black Forest have been scared half to death with your blade at his throat,’ snapped Reginald.

I started, my mouth working but lost for words. ‘That was … That was …’

‘Different? Because it involved your quest to find your father’s killers? Haytham …’ He took my elbow and led me out of the cellar and back out into the corridor, and we began to climb the steps again. ‘This is even more important than that. You may not think so, but it is. It involves the entire future of the Order.’

I wasn’t sure any more. I wasn’t sure what was more important, but said nothing.

‘And what happens when the decoding is over?’ I asked as we reached the entrance hall once again.

He looked at me.

‘Oh no,’ I said, understanding. ‘Neither is to be harmed.’

‘Haytham, I don’t much care for you giving me orders …’

‘Then don’t think of it as an order,’ I hissed. ‘Think of it as a threat. Keep them here when their work is over if you must, but if they are harmed then you will have me to answer to.’

He looked at me long and hard. I realized that my heart was hammering and hoped to God it wasn’t somehow visible. Had I ever gone against him like this? With such force? I didn’t think so.

‘Very well,’ he said, after a moment, ‘they will not be harmed.’

We spent dinner in near-silence, and the offer of a bed for the night was made reluctantly. I leave in the morning; Reginald promises to be in touch with news concerning the journal. The warmth between us, though, is gone. In me, he sees insubordination; in him, I see lies.

18 April 1754

i

Earlier this evening I found myself at the Royal Opera House, taking a seat next to Reginald, who was settling in for a performance of *The Beggar's Opera* with evident glee. Of course, the last time we'd met, I'd threatened him, which wasn't something I had forgotten, but evidently he had. Forgotten or forgiven, one of the two. Either way, it was as though the confrontation had never taken place, the slate wiped clean, either by his anticipation of the night's forthcoming entertainment or by the fact that he believed the amulet to be near.

It was inside the opera house, in fact, around the neck of an Assassin who had been named in Vedomir's journal then tracked down by Templar agents.

An Assassin. He was my next target. My first job since rescuing Lucio in Corsica, and the first to feel the bite of my new weapon: my hidden blade. As I took the opera glasses and looked at the man across the hall – my target – the irony of it suddenly struck me.

My target was Miko.

I left Reginald in his seat and made my way along the corridors of the opera house, along the back of the seats, past the opera's patrons, until I found myself at the stalls. At the box where Miko sat I let myself in silently then tapped him gently on the shoulder.

I was ready for him, if he tried anything, but though his body tensed and I heard him give a sharp intake of breath, he made no move to defend himself. It was almost as though he expected it when I reached and took the amulet from his neck – and did I sense a feeling of … relief? As though he were grateful to relinquish the responsibility, pleased no longer to be its custodian?

'You should have come to me,' he sighed, 'We would have found another way …'

'Yes. But then you would have known,' I replied.

There was a click as I engaged the blade, and I saw him smile, knowing it was the one I had taken from him in Corsica.

'For what it's worth, I'm sorry,' I told him.

‘As am I,’ he said, and I killed him.

ii

Some hours later, I attended the meeting at the house on Fleet and Bride, standing around a table with others, our attention focused on Reginald, as well as the book on the table before us. It was open, and I could see the symbol of the Assassins on the page.

‘Gentlemen,’ said Reginald. His eyes were shining, as though he were close to tears. ‘I hold in my hand a key. And if this book is to be believed, it will open the doors of a storehouse built by Those Who Came Before.’

I contained myself. ‘Ah, our dear friends who ruled, ruined and then vanished from the world,’ I said. ‘Do you know what it is we’ll find within?’

If Reginald picked up on my sarcasm, then he made no sign. Instead, he reached for the amulet, held it up and basked in the hush from those assembled as it began to glow in his hand. It was impressive, even I had to admit, and Reginald looked over at me.

‘It could contain knowledge,’ he replied. ‘Perhaps a weapon, or something as of yet unknown, unfathomable in its construction and purpose. It could be any of these things. Or none of them. They are still an enigma, these precursors. But of one thing I am certain – whatever waits behind those doors shall prove a great boon to us.’

‘Or our enemies,’ I said, ‘should they find it first.’

He smiled. Was I beginning to believe, at last?

‘They won’t. You’ve seen to that.’

Miko had died wanting to find another way. What had he meant? An accord of Assassin and Templar? My thoughts went to my father.

‘I assume you know where this storehouse is?’ I said, after a pause.

‘Mr Harrison?’ said Reginald, and John stepped forward with a map, unfurling it.

‘How fare your calculations?’ said Reginald, as John circled an area of the map which, leaning closer, I saw contained New York and Massachusetts.

‘I believe the site lays somewhere within this region,’ he said.

‘That’s a lot of ground to cover.’ I frowned.

‘My apologies. Would that I could be more accurate …’

‘That’s all right,’ said Reginald. ‘It suffices for a start. And this is why we’ve called you here, Master Kenway. We’d like for you to travel to America, locate the storehouse, and take possession of its contents.’

‘I am yours to command,’ I said. To myself, I cursed him and his folly, and wished I could be left alone to continue my own investigations, then added, ‘Although a job of this magnitude will require more than just myself.’

‘Of course,’ said Reginald, and handed me a piece of paper. ‘Here are the names of five men sympathetic to our cause. Each is also uniquely suited to aid you in your endeavour. With them at your side, you’ll want for nothing.’

‘Well, then I’d best be on my way,’ I said.

‘I knew our faith in you was not misplaced. We’ve booked you a passage to Boston. Your ship leaves at dawn. Go forth, Haytham – and bring honour to us all.’

8 July 1754

i

Boston twinkled in the sun as squawking gulls circled overhead, water slapped noisily at the harbour wall and the gangplank banged like a drum as we disembarked from the *Providence*, weary and disorientated by over a month at sea but weak with happiness at finally reaching land. I stopped in my tracks as sailors from a neighbouring frigate rolled barrels across my path with a sound like distant thunder, and my gaze went from the glittering emerald ocean, where the masts of Royal Navy warships, yachts and frigates rocked gently from side to side, to the dock, the wide stone steps that led from the piers and jetties to the harbour thronging with redcoats, traders and sailors, then up past the harbour to the city of Boston itself, the church spires and distinctive red-brick buildings seemingly resisting any attempts at arrangement, as though flung by some godly hand on to the side of the hill. And, everywhere, Union flags that fluttered gently in the breeze, just to remind visitors – in case they had any doubts – that the British were here.

The passage from England to America had been eventful, to say the least. I had made friends and discovered enemies, surviving an attempt on my life – by Assassins, no doubt – who wanted to take revenge for the killing at the opera house and to recover the amulet.

To the other passengers and crew of the ship I was a mystery. Some thought I was a scholar. I told my new acquaintance, James Fairweather, that I ‘solved problems’, and that I was travelling to America to see what life was like there; what had been retained from the empire and what had been discarded; what changes British rule had wrought.

Which were fibs, of course. But not outright lies. For though I came on specific Templar business, I was curious, too, to see this land I had heard so much about, which was apparently so vast, its people infused with a pioneering, indomitable spirit.

There were those who said that spirit might one day be used against us, and that our subjects, if they harnessed that determination, would be a formidable

foe. And there were others who said America was simply too big to be governed by us; that it was a powder keg, ready to go off; that its people would grow tired of the taxes imposed upon them so that a country thousands of miles away could fight wars with other countries thousands of miles away; and that when it did go off we might not have the resources to protect our interests. All of this I hoped to be able to judge for myself.

But only as an adjunct to my main mission, though, which … well, I think it's fair to say that, for me, the mission has changed en route. I'd stepped on the *Providence* holding a particular set of beliefs and stepped off having had them first challenged, then shaken and, finally, changed, and all because of the book.

The book that Reginald had given me: I'd spent much of my time aboard the ship poring over it; I must have read it no fewer than two dozen times, and still I'm not sure I have made sense of it.

One thing I do know, though. Whereas before, I'd thought of Those Who Came Before with doubt, as would a sceptic, an unbeliever, and considered Reginald's obsession with them to be at best an irritation, at worst a preoccupation that threatened to derail the very workings of our Order, I no longer did. I *believed*.

The book seemed to have been written – or should I say written, illustrated, decorated, *scrawled* – by a man, or maybe several of them: several lunatics who had filled page after page with what, at first, I took to be wild and outlandish claims, fit only for scoffing at then ignoring.

Yet, somehow, the more I read, the more I came to see the truth. Over the years, Reginald had told me (I used to say 'bored me with') his theories concerning a race of beings that predated our own. He'd always asserted that we were born of their struggles and thus obliged to serve them; that our ancestors had fought to secure their own freedom in a long and bloody war.

What I discovered during my passage was that all of this originated from the book, which as I read it, was having what I can only describe as a profound effect upon me. Suddenly I knew why Reginald had become so obsessed with this race. I'd sneered at him, remember? But, reading the book, I felt no desire to sneer at all, just a sense of wonderment, a feeling of lightness inside me that at times made me feel almost giddy with an excitement and a sense of what I can describe as 'insignificance', of realizing my own place in the world. It was as though I had peered through a keyhole expecting to see another room on the other side but had seen a whole new world instead.

And what had become of Those Who Came Before? What had they left behind, and how could it benefit us? That I didn't know. It was a mystery that

had confounded my Order for centuries, a mystery I'd been asked to solve, a mystery that had brought me here, to Boston.

'Master Kenway! Master Kenway!'

I was being hailed by a young gentleman who appeared from within the throng. Going over to him, I said, carefully, 'Yes? May I help you?'

He held out his hand to be shaken. 'Charles Lee, sir. A pleasure to make your acquaintance. I've been asked to introduce you to the city. Help you settle in.'

I had been told about Charles Lee. He was not with the Order but was keen to join us and, according to Reginald, would want to ingratiate himself with me in the hope of securing my sponsorship. Seeing him reminded me: I was Grand Master of the Colonial Rite now.

Charles had long dark hair, thick sideburns and a prominent, hawk-like nose and, even though I liked him straight away, I noticed that, while he smiled when he spoke to me, he reserved a look of disdain for everybody else on the harbour.

He indicated for me to leave my bags, and we began to thread our way through the crowds of the long pier, past dazed-looking passengers and crew still getting their bearings on dry land; through dock workers, traders and redcoats, excited children and dogs scuttling underfoot.

I tipped my hat to a pair of giggling women then said to him, 'Do you like it here, Charles?'

'There's a certain charm to Boston, I suppose,' he called back over his shoulder. 'To all of the colonies, really. Granted, their cities have none of London's sophistication or splendour, but the people are earnest and hard-working. They've a certain pioneer spirit that I find compelling.'

I looked around. 'It's quite something, really – watching a place that's finally found its feet.'

'Feet awash in the blood of others, I'm afraid.'

'Ah, that's a story old as time itself, and one that's not likely to change. We're cruel and desperate creatures, set in our conquering ways. The Saxons and the Franks. The Ottomans and Safavids. I could go on for hours. The whole of human history is but a series of subjugations.'

'I pray one day we rise above it,' replied Charles earnestly.

'While you pray, I'll act. We'll see who finds success first, hmm?'

'It was an expression,' he said, with a wounded edge to his voice.

'Aye. And a dangerous one. Words have power. Wield them wisely.'

We lapsed into silence.

'Your commission is with Edward Braddock, is it not?' I said, as we passed a cart laden with fruit.

‘Aye, but he’s yet to reach America, and I figured I might … well … at least until he arrives … I thought …’

I stepped nimbly to the side to avoid a small girl in pigtails. ‘Out with it,’ I said.

‘Forgive me, sir. I had … I had hoped that I might study under you. If I am to serve the Order, I can imagine no better mentor than yourself.’

I felt a small surge of satisfaction. ‘Kind of you to say, but I think you overestimate me.’

‘Impossible, sir.’

Not far away, a red-faced paperboy wearing a cap yelled out news of the battle at Fort Necessity: ‘French forces declare victory following Washington’s retreat,’ he bawled. ‘In response, the Duke of Newcastle pledges more troops to counter the foreign menace!’

The foreign menace, I thought. The French, in other words. This conflict they were calling the French and Indian War was set to escalate, if the rumours were to be believed.

There was not an Englishman alive who didn’t detest the French, but I knew one Englishman in particular who hated them with a vein-bulging passion, and that was Edward Braddock. When he did arrive in America, that’s where he’d be heading, leaving me to go about my own business – or so I hoped.

I waved away the paperboy when he tried to extort sixpence from me for the broadsheet. I had no desire to read about more French victories.

Meanwhile, as we reached our horses and Charles told me that we were to ride for the Green Dragon Tavern, I wondered what the other men would be like.

‘Have you been told why it is I’ve come to Boston?’ I asked.

‘No. Master Birch said I should know only as much as you saw fit to share. He sent me a list of names and bade me ensure you could find them.’

‘And have you had any luck with that?’

‘Aye. William Johnson waits for us at the Green Dragon.’

‘How well do you know him?’

‘Not well. But he saw the Order’s mark and did not hesitate to come.’

‘Prove yourself loyal to our cause and you may yet know our plans as well,’ I said.

He beamed. ‘I should like nothing more, sir.’

ii

The Green Dragon was a large brick building with a sloping pitch roof and a sign over the front door that bore the eponymous dragon. According to Charles, it

was the most celebrated coffee house in the city, where everybody from patriots to redcoats and governors would meet to chat, to plot, to gossip and trade. Anything that happened in Boston, the chances were it originated here, on Union Street.

Not that Union Street itself was at all prepossessing. Little more than a river of mud, it slowed our pace as we approached the tavern, being sure not to splash any of the groups of gentlemen who stood outside, leaning on canes and chattering intently. Avoiding carts and giving curt nods to soldiers on horseback, we reached a low, wooden stables building where we left our horses, then made our way carefully across the streams of muck to the tavern. Inside, we immediately became acquainted with the owners: Catherine Kerr, who was (without wishing to be ungentlemanly), a little on the large side; and Cornelius Douglass, whose first words I heard upon entering were, 'Kiss my arse, ya wench!'

Fortunately, he wasn't talking either to me or to Charles, but to Catherine. When the two of them saw us, their demeanours instantly changed from warlike to servile and they saw to it that my bags were taken up to my room.

Charles was right: William Johnson was already there, and in a room upstairs we were introduced. An older man, similarly attired to Charles but with a certain weariness to him, an experience that was etched into the lines on his face, he stood from studying maps to shake my hand. 'A pleasure,' he said, and then, as Charles left to stand guard, leaned forward and said to me, 'A good lad, if a bit earnest.'

I kept any feelings I had on Charles to myself, indicating with my eyes that he should continue.

'I'm told you're putting together an expedition,' he said.

'We believe there is a precursor site in the region,' I said, choosing my words carefully, then adding, 'I require your knowledge of the land and its people to find it.'

He pulled a face. 'Sadly, a chest containing my research has been stolen. Without it, I'm of no use to you.'

I knew from experience that nothing was ever easy. 'Then we'll find it,' I sighed. 'Have you any leads?'

'My associate, Thomas Hickey, has been making the rounds. He's quite good at loosening tongues.'

'Tell me where I can find him and I'll see about speeding things along.'

'We've heard rumours of bandits operating from a compound south-west of here,' said William. 'You'll likely find him there.'

Outside the city, corn in a field waved in a light night-time breeze. Not far away was the high fencing of a compound that belonged to the bandits, and from inside came the sound of raucous festivities. Why not? I thought. Every day you've avoided death by the hangman's noose or on the end of a redcoat's bayonet is a cause for celebration when you lived life as a bandit.

At the gates there were various guards and hangers-on milling around, some of them drinking, some attempting to stand guard, and all of them in a constant state of argument. To the left of the compound, the cornfield rose to a small hill peak and on it sat a lookout tending to a small fire. Sitting tending a fire isn't quite the desired position for a lookout, but, otherwise, he was one of the few on this side of the compound who seemed to be taking his job seriously. Certainly, they'd failed to post any scouting parties. Or if they had, then the scouting parties were lounging under a tree somewhere, blind drunk, because there was nobody to see Charles and I as we crept closer, approaching a man, who was crouching by a crumbling stone wall, keeping watch on the compound.

It was him: Thomas Hickey. A round-faced man, a little shabby, and probably too fond of the grog himself, if my guess was correct. This was the man who, according to William, was good at loosening tongues? He looked like he'd have problems loosening his own drawers.

Perhaps, arrogantly, my distaste for him was fed by the fact that he was the first contact I'd met since arriving in Boston to whom my name meant nothing. But, if that annoyed me, it was nothing compared to the effect it had on Charles, who drew his sword.

'Show some respect, boy,' he snarled.

I laid a restraining hand on him. 'Peace, Charles,' I said, then addressed Thomas: 'William Johnson sent us in the hopes we might … expedite your search.'

'Don't need no expediting,' drawled Thomas. 'Don't need none of your fancy London-speak, neither. I've found the men done the theft.'

Beside me, Charles bristled. 'Then why are you just lazing around?'

'Figurin out how to deal with those varlets,' said Thomas, indicated the compound then turned to us with expectant eyes and an impudent grin.

I sighed. Time to go to work. 'Right, I'll kill the lookout and take a position behind the guards. You two approach from the front. When I open fire on a group, you charge in. We'll have the element of surprise on our side. Half will fall before they've even realized what's happening.'

I took my musket, left my two comrades and crept to the edge of the cornfield, where I crouched and took aim at the lookout. He was warming his hands with his rifle between his legs, and probably wouldn't have seen or heard me if I'd approached riding a camel. It felt almost cowardly to squeeze the trigger, but squeeze it I did.

I cursed as he pitched forward, sending up a shower of sparks. He'd start to burn soon, and if nothing else the smell was going to alert his compatriots. Hurrying now, I returned to Charles and Thomas, who drew closer to the bandit compound while I took up position not far away, pushed my rifle butt into my shoulder and squinted along the sights at one of the bandits, who stood – though 'swayed' might have been more accurate – just outside the gates. As I watched he began to move towards the cornfield, perhaps to relieve the sentry I'd already shot, who even now was roasting on his own fire. I waited until he was at the edge of the cornfield, pausing as there was a sudden lull in the merriment from inside the compound, and then, as a roar went up, squeezing the trigger.

He dropped to his knees then keeled over to one side, part of his skull missing, and my gaze went straight to the compound entrance to see if the shot had been heard.

No, was the answer. Instead the rabble at the gate had turned their attention on Charles and Thomas, drawn their swords and pistols and began to shout at them: 'Clear off!'

Charles and Thomas loitered, just as I'd told them. I could see their hands itching to draw their own weapons, but they bided their time. Good men. Waiting for me to take the first shot.

The time was now. I drew a bead on one of the men, whom I took to be the ringleader. I pulled the trigger and saw blood spray from the back of his head, and he lurched back.

This time my shot was heard, but it didn't matter, because at the same time Charles and Thomas drew their blades and struck and two more of the guards keeled over with blood fountaining from neck wounds. The gate was in disarray and the battle began in earnest.

I managed to pick off two more of the bandits before abandoning my musket, drawing my sword and running forward, leaping into the fray and standing side by side with Charles and Thomas. I enjoyed fighting with companions for once, and felled three of the thugs, who died screaming even as their companions made for the gates and barricaded themselves inside.

In no time at all, the only men left standing were me, Charles and Thomas, all three of us breathing hard and flicking the blood from our steel. I regarded Thomas with a new respect: he'd acquitted himself well, with a speed and skill

that belied his looks. Charles, too, was looking at him, though with rather more distaste, as though Thomas's proficiency in battle had annoyed him.

Now we had a new problem, though: we'd taken the outside of the compound, but the door had been blocked by those retreating. It was Thomas who suggested we shoot the powder keg – another good idea from the man I'd previously dismissed as a drunk – so I did, blowing a hole in the wall, through which we poured, stepping over the torn and ragged corpses littering the hallway on the other side.

We ran on. Thick, deep carpets and rugs were on the floor, while exquisite tapestries had been hung at the windows. The whole place was in semi-darkness. There was screaming, male and female, and running feet as we made our way through quickly, me with a sword in one hand and a pistol in the other, using both, slaying any man in my way.

Thomas had looted a candlestick, and he used it to cave in the head of a bandit, wiping brains and blood from his face just as Charles reminded us why we were there: to find William's chest. He described it as we raced along more gloomy corridors, finding less resistance now. Either the bandits were staying clear of us or were marshalling themselves into a more cohesive force. Not that it mattered what they were doing: we needed to find the chest.

Which we did, nestled at the back of a boudoir which stank of ale and sex and was seemingly full of people: scantily clad women who grabbed clothes and ran screaming, and several thieves loading guns. A bullet smacked into the wood of the doorway by my side and we took cover as another man, this one naked, raised his pistol to fire.

Charles returned fire around the door frame, and the naked man crashed to the carpet with an untidy red hole at his chest, grabbing a fistful of bedclothes as he went. Another bullet gouged the frame, and we ducked back. Thomas drew his sword as two more bandits came hurtling down the corridor towards us, Charles joining in.

'Lay down your weapons,' called one of the remaining bandits from inside the boudoir, 'and I'll consider letting you live.'

'I make you the same offer,' I said from behind the door. 'We have no quarrel. I only wish to return this chest to its rightful owner.'

There was a sneer in his voice. 'Nothing *rightful* about Mr Johnson.'

'I won't ask again.'

'Agreed.'

I heard a movement nearby and flitted across the doorway. The other man had been trying to creep up on us, but I put a bullet between his eyes and he flopped to the floor, his pistol skittering away from him. The remaining bandit fired

again and made a dive for his companion's gun, but I'd already reloaded and anticipated his move, and I put a shot in his flank as he stretched for it. Like a wounded animal he jackknifed back to the bed, landing in a wet mess of blood and bedclothes and staring up at me as I entered cautiously, gun held in front of me.

He gave me a baleful look. This can't have been how he planned for his night to end.

'Your kind has no need for books and maps,' I said, indicating William's chest. 'Who put you up to this?'

'Never seen a person,' he wheezed, shaking his head. 'It's always dead drops and letters. But they always pay, so we do the jobs.'

Everywhere I went I met men like the bandit, who would do anything, it seemed – anything for a bit of coin. It was men like him who had invaded my childhood home and killed my father. Men like him who set me on the path I walk today.

They always pay. We do the jobs.

Somehow, through a veil of disgust, I managed to resist the urge to kill him.

'Well, those days are done. Tell your masters I said as much.'

He raised himself slightly, perhaps realizing I planned to let him live. 'Who do I say you are?'

'You don't. They'll know,' I said. And let him go.

Thomas began grabbing more loot while Charles and I took the chest, and we made our way out of the compound. Retreating was easier, most of the bandits having decided that discretion was the better part of valour and staying out of our way, and we made it outside to our horses and galloped away.

iv

At the Green Dragon, William Johnson was once again poring over his maps. Straight away he was digging through the chest when we returned it to him, checking his maps and scrolls were there.

'My thanks, Master Kenway,' he said, sitting back at his table, satisfied that everything was in order. 'Now tell me what it is you need.'

Around my neck was the amulet. I'd found myself taking it off and admiring it. Was it my imagination, or did it seem to glow? It hadn't – not on the night I took it from Miko at the opera house. The first time I had seen it glow was when Reginald held it up at Fleet and Bride. Now, though, it seemed to do in my hand what it had done in his, as though it were powered – how ridiculous it seemed – by belief.

I looked at him, then reached my hands to my neck, removed the amulet from over my head and handed it across the table. He held my gaze as he took it, sensing its importance, then squinted at it, studying it carefully as I said, ‘The images on this amulet – are they familiar to you? Perhaps one of the tribes has shown you something similar?’

‘It appears Kanien’kehá:ka in origin,’ said William.

The Mohawk. My pulse quickened.

‘Can you trace it to a specific location?’ I said, ‘I need to know where it came from.’

‘With my research returned, perhaps. Let me see what I can do.’

I nodded my thanks. ‘First, though, I’d like to know a little more about you, William. Tell me about yourself.’

‘What’s to tell? I was born in Ireland, to Catholic parents – which, I learnt early in life, severely limited my opportunities. So I converted to Protestantism and journeyed here at the behest of my uncle. But I fear my Uncle Peter was not the sharpest of tools. He sought to open trade with the Mohawk – but chose to build his settlement away from the trade routes instead of *on* them. I tried to reason with the man … But …’ He sighed ‘… as I said, not the sharpest. So I took what little money I’d earned and bought my own plot of land. I built a home, a farm, a store and a mill. Humble beginnings – but well situated, which made all the difference.’

‘So this is how you came to know the Mohawk?’

‘Indeed. And it has proved a valuable relationship.’

‘But you’ve heard nothing of the precursors’ site? No hidden temple or ancient constructs?’

‘Yes and no. Which is to say, they have their fair share of sacred sites but none matching what you describe. Earthen mounds, forest clearings, hidden caves … All are natural, though. No strange metal. No … odd glows.’

‘Hmmm. It is well hidden,’ I said.

‘Even to them, it seems.’ He smiled. ‘But cheer up, my friend. You’ll have your precursor treasure. I swear it.’

I raised my glass. ‘To our success, then.’

‘And soon!’

I smiled. We were four now. We were a team.

10 July 1754

i

We now have our room at the Green Dragon Pub – a base, if you like – and it was this I entered, to find Thomas, Charles and William: Thomas drinking, Charles looking perturbed and William studying his charts and maps. I greeted them, only to be rewarded with a belch from Thomas.

‘Charming,’ spat Charles.

I grinned. ‘Cheer up, Charles. He’ll grow on you,’ I said, and sat next to Thomas, who gave me a grateful look.

‘Any news?’ I said.

He shook his head. ‘Whispers of things. Nothin solid at the moment. I know you’re lookin for word of anything out the ordinary … Dealin with temples and spirits and ancient times and whatnot. But … so far, can’t say my boys have heard much.’

‘No trinkets or artefacts being moved through your … shadow market?’

‘Nothin new. Couple ill-gotten weapons – some jewellery likely lifted from a living thing. But you said to listen for talk of glows and hums and look out for strange sights, right? An I ain’t heard nothin ’bout that.’

‘Keep at it,’ I asked.

‘Oh, I will. You done me a great service, mister – and I fully intend to repay my debt – thricefold, if it pleases.’

‘Thank you, Thomas.’

‘Place to sleep and meal to eat is thanks enough. Don’t you worry. I’ll get you sorted soon.’

He raised his tankard, only to find it was empty, and I laughed, clapped him on the back and watched as he stood and lurched off in search of ale from elsewhere. Then I turned my attention to William, moving over to his lectern and pulling up a chair to sit down beside him. ‘How fares your search?’

He frowned up at me. ‘Maps and maths aren’t cutting it.’

Nothing is ever simple, I rued.

‘What of your local contacts?’ I asked him, taking a seat opposite.

Thomas had bustled back in, with a tankard of foaming ale in his fist and a red mark on his face from where he'd been very recently slapped, just in time to hear William say, 'We'll need to earn their trust before they'll share what they know.'

'I have an idea on how we might be effectin that,' slurred Thomas, and we turned to look at him with varying degrees of interest, Charles in the way he usually regarded Thomas, with a look as though he'd just trodden in dog mess, William with bemusement, and me with a genuine interest. Thomas, drunk or sober, was a sharper customer than either Charles or William gave him credit for. He went on now: 'There's a man who was taken to enslavin natives. Rescue 'em and they'll owe us.'

Natives, I thought. The Mohawk. Now there was an idea. 'Do you know where they're being held?'

He shook his head. But Charles was leaning forward. 'Benjamin Church will. He's a finder and a fixer – he's also on your list.'

I smiled at him. Good work, I thought. 'And there I was, wondering who we might solicit next.'

ii

Benjamin Church was a doctor, and we found his house easily enough. When there was no answer at his door, Charles wasted no time kicking it down, and we hurried in, only to find that the place had been ransacked. Not only had furniture been upturned and documents spread all over the floor, disrupted during a messy search, but there were also traces of blood on the floor.

We looked at one another. 'It seems we're not the only ones looking for Mr Church,' I said, with my sword drawn.

'Dammit!' exploded Charles. 'He could be anywhere. What do we do?'

I pointed to a portrait of the good doctor hanging over the mantelpiece. It showed a man in his early twenties, who nonetheless had a distinguished look. 'We find him. Come, I'll show you how.'

And I began telling Charles about the art of surveillance, of blending into your surroundings, disappearing, noticing routines and habits, studying movement around and adapting to it, becoming at one with the environment, becoming part of the scenery.

I realized how much I was enjoying my new role as tutor. As a boy I'd been taught by my father, and then Reginald, and I had always looked forward to my sessions with them – always relished the passing on and imparting of new knowledge – *forbidden* knowledge, the sort you couldn't find in books.

Teaching it to Charles, I wondered if my father and Reginald had felt the way I did now: serene, wise and worldly. I showed him how to ask questions, how to eavesdrop, how to move around the city like a ghost, gathering and processing information. And after that we parted, carried out our investigations individually, then an hour or so later came back together, faces grim.

What we had learnt was that Benjamin Church had been seen in the company of other men – three or four of them – who had been bearing him away from his house. Some of the witnesses had assumed Benjamin was drunk; others had noticed how bruised and bloodied he had been. One man who went to his aid had received a knife in his guts as thanks. Wherever they were going, it was clear that Benjamin was in trouble, but where were they going? The answer came from a herald, who stood shouting out the day's news.

'Have you seen this man?' I asked him.

'It difficult to say …' He shook his head. 'So many people pass through the square, it's hard to …'

I pressed some coins into his hand and his demeanour changed at once. He leaned forward with a conspiratorial air: 'He was being taken to the waterfront warehouses just east of here.'

'Thank you kindly for your help,' I told him.

'But hurry,' he said. 'He was with Silas's men. Such meetings tended to end poorly.'

Silas, I thought, as we weaved our way through the streets on our way to the warehouse district. Now, who was Silas?

The crowds had thinned considerably by the time we reached our destination, well away from the main thoroughfare, where a faint smell of fish seemed to hang over the day. The warehouse sat in a row of similar buildings, all of them huge and exuding a sense of erosion and disrepair, and I might have walked straight past if it hadn't been for the guard who lounged outside the main doors. He sat on one barrel, his feet up on another, chewing, not as alert as he should have been, so that it was easy enough to stop Charles and pull him to the side of the building before we were spotted.

There was an entrance on the wall closest to us, and I checked it was unguarded before trying the door. Locked. From inside we heard the sounds of a struggle then an agonized scream. I'm not a gambling man, but I would have bet on the owner of that agonized scream: Benjamin Church. Charles and I looked at each other. We had to get in there, and fast. Craning around the side of the warehouse, I took another look at the guard, saw the telltale flash of a key ring at his waist, and knew what I had to do.

I waited until a man pushing a barrow had passed then, with a finger to my lips, told Charles to wait and emerged from cover, weaving a little as I came around to the front of the building, looking to all intents and purposes as though I'd had too much to drink.

Sitting on his barrel, the sentry looked sideways at me, his lip curled. He began to withdraw his sword from its sheath, showing a little of its gleaming blade. Staggering, I straightened, held up a hand to acknowledge the warning and made as though to move away, before stumbling a little and brushing into him.

'Oi!' he protested, and shoved me away, so hard that I lost my footing and fell into the street. I picked myself up and, with another wave of apology, was on my way.

What he didn't know was that I left in possession of the key ring, which I had lifted from his waist. Back at the side of the warehouse we tried a couple of the keys before, to our great relief, finding one that opened the door. Wincing at every phantom creak and squeak, we eased it open then crept through, into the dark and damp-smelling warehouse.

Inside, we crouched by the door, slowly adjusting to our new surroundings: a vast space, most of it in darkness. Black, echoing hollows seemed to stretch back into infinity, the only light coming from three braziers which had been set out in the middle of the room. We saw, at last, the man we had been looking for, the man from the portrait: Dr Benjamin Church. He sat tied to a chair, a guard on either side of him, one of his eyes purple and bruised, his head lolling and blood dripping steadily from a gashed lip to the dirty white scarf he wore.

Standing in front of him was a sharp-dressed man – Silas, no doubt – and a companion, who was sharpening a knife. The soft swooshing sound it made was almost gentle, hypnotic, and for a moment was the only noise in the room.

'Why must you always make things so difficult, Benjamin?' asked Silas, with an air of theatrical sadness. He had an English accent, I realized, and sounded high-born. He continued: 'Merely provide me with recompense and all shall be forgiven.'

Benjamin regarded him with an injured but defiant gaze. 'I'll not pay for protection I don't need,' he snapped back, undaunted.

Silas smiled and airily waved a hand around at the dank, wet and dirty warehouse. 'Clearly, you do require protection, else we wouldn't be here.'

Benjamin turned his head and spat a gobbet of blood, which slapped to the stone floor, then turned his eyes back to Silas, who wore a look as though Benjamin had passed wind at dinner. 'How very gauche,' he said. 'Now, what shall we do about our guest?'

The man sharpening the knives looked up. This was his cue. ‘Maybe I take his hands,’ he rasped. ‘Put an end to ’is surgerin? Maybe I take ’is tongue. Put an end to ’is wagglin? Or maybe I take ’is cock. Put an end to ’is fuckin us.’

A tremor seemed to go through the men, of disgust, fear and amusement. Silas reacted: ‘So many options, I can’t possibly decide.’ He looked at the knifeman and pretended to be lost in indecision, then added, ‘Take all three.’

‘Now hold on a moment,’ said Benjamin quickly. ‘Perhaps I was hasty in refusing you earlier.’

‘I’m so very sorry, Benjamin, but that door has closed,’ said Silas sadly.

‘Be reasonable …’ started Benjamin, a pleading note in his voice.

Silas tilted his head to one side, and his eyebrows knitted together in false concern. ‘I rather think I was. But you took advantage of my generosity. I won’t be made a fool of a second time.’

The torturer moved forward, holding the knifepoint up to his own eyeball, bugging his eyes and grinning maniacally.

‘I fear I lack the constitution to bear witness to such barbarism,’ said Silas, with the air of an easily offended old woman. ‘Come and find me when you’ve finished, Cutter.’

Silas went to leave as Benjamin Church screamed, ‘You’ll regret this, Silas! You hear me? I’ll have your head!’

At the door Silas stopped, turned and looked at him. ‘No,’ he said with the beginnings of a giggle. ‘No, I rather think you won’t.’

Then Benjamin’s screams began as Cutter began his work, snickering slightly as he began to wield the knife like an artist making his first painterly strokes, as though at the outset of a much larger project. Poor old Dr Church was the canvas and Cutter was painting his masterpiece.

I whispered to Charles what needed to be done, and he moved away, scuttling through the dark to the rear of the warehouse, where I saw him put a hand to his mouth to call, ‘Over here, y’ bastards,’ then immediately move away, quick and silent.

Cutter’s head jerked up, and he waved the two guards over, glancing warily around the warehouse at the same time as his men drew their swords and moved carefully towards the back, where the noise had come from – even as there was another call, this time from a different pocket of blackness, an almost whispered, ‘Over here.’

The two guards swallowed, exchanged a nervous glance, while Cutter’s gaze roamed the shadows of the building, his jaw set, half in fear, half in frustration. I could see his mind working: was it his own men playing a prank? Kids messing about?

No. It was enemy action.

‘What’s going on?’ snarled one of the heavies. Both craned their necks to stare into the dark spaces of the warehouse. ‘Get a torch,’ the first snapped at his companion, and the second man darted back into the middle of the room, gingerly lifted one of the braziers, and then was bent over with the weight of it as he tried to move it over.

Suddenly there was a yelp from within the shadows and Cutter was shouting: ‘What? What the hell is going on?’

The man with the brazier set it down then peered into the gloom. ‘It’s Greg,’ he called back over his shoulder. ‘He ain’t there no more, boss.’

Cutter bridled. ‘What do you mean, “he ain’t there”? He was there before.’

‘Greg!’ called the second man. ‘Greg?’

There was no reply. ‘I’m telling you, boss, he ain’t there no more.’ And just at that moment, as though to emphasize the point, a sword came flying from the dark recesses, skittered across the stone floor and stopped to rest by Cutter’s feet.

The blade was stained with blood.

‘That’s Greg’s sword,’ said the first man nervily. ‘They got Greg.’

‘Who got Greg?’ snapped Cutter.

‘I don’t know, but they got him.’

‘Whoever you are, you better show your face,’ shouted Cutter. His eyes darted to Benjamin, and I could see his brain working, the conclusion he came to: that they were being attacked by friends of the doctor; that it was a rescue operation. The first thug remained where he was by the safety of the brazier, the tip of his sword glinting in the firelight as he trembled. Charles stayed in the shadows, a silent menace. I knew it was only Charles, but to Cutter and his pal he was an avenging demon, as silent and implacable as death itself.

‘You better get out here, before I finish your buddy,’ rasped Cutter. He moved closer to Benjamin, about to hold the blade to his throat, and, his back to me, I saw my chance and crept out of my hiding place, stealthily moving towards him. At the same time, his pal turned, saw me, yelped, ‘Boss, behind you!’ and Cutter wheeled.

I leapt and at the same time engaged the hidden blade. Cutter panicked, and I saw his knife hand tauten, about to finish Benjamin. At full stretch I managed to knock his hand away and send him flying back, but I too was off balance and he had the chance to draw his sword and meet me one on one, sword in one hand, torture knife in the other.

Over his shoulder I saw that Charles hadn’t wasted his opportunity, had come flying out at the guard, and there was the chime of steel as their blades met. In seconds Cutter and I were fighting, too, but it swiftly became clear he was out of

his depth. Good with a knife he may have been, but he wasn't used to opponents who fought back; he was a torture master not a warrior. And while his hands moved quickly and his blades flicked across my vision, all he showed me were tricks, sleight of hand, moves that might terrify a man tied to a chair, but not me. What I saw was a sadist – a frightened sadist. And if there's one thing more loathsome and pathetic than a sadist, it's a frightened one.

He had no anticipation. No footwork or defensive skills. Behind him, the fight was over: the second thug dropped to his knees with a groan, and Charles planted a foot to his chest and withdrew his sword, letting him fall to the stone.

Cutter saw it, too, and I let him watch, stood back and allowed him to see his companion, the last of his protection, die. There was a thumping on the door – the guard from outside had at last discovered the theft of his keys and was trying and failing to get in. Cutter's eyes swivelled in that direction, looking for salvation. Finding none. Those frightened eyes came back to me and I grinned then moved forward and began some cutting of my own. I took no pleasure in it. I merely gave him the treatment he deserved, and when he at last folded to the floor with a bright-red gash open in his throat and blood sheeting down his front, I felt nothing besides a detached sense of gratification, of justice having been served. No one else would suffer by his blade.

I'd forgotten about the banging at the door until it stopped, and in the sudden silence I glanced at Charles, who came to the same conclusion I did: the guard had gone for help. Benjamin groaned and I went to him, sliced through his bindings with two slashes of my blade then caught him as he fell forward from the chair.

Straight away my hands were slick with his blood, but he seemed to be breathing steadily and, though his eyes occasionally squeezed shut as he flinched with pain, they were open. He'd live. His wounds were painful but they weren't deep.

He looked at me. 'Who … who are you?' he managed.

I tipped my hat. 'Haytham Kenway at your service.'

There were the beginnings of a smile on his face as he said, 'Thank you. Thank you. But … I don't understand … why are you here?'

'You are a Templar knight, are you not?' I said to him.

He nodded.

'As am I, and we don't make a habit of leaving fellow knights at the mercy of knife-wielding madmen. That, and the fact I need your help.'

'You have it,' he said. 'Just tell me what you need …'

I helped him to his feet and waved Charles over. Together we helped him to the side door of the warehouse and let ourselves out, savouring the cool, fresh air

after the dank smell of blood and death inside.

And as we began to make our way back to Union Street and the sanctuary of the Green Dragon, I told Dr Benjamin Church about the list.

13 July 1754

i

We were gathered in the Green Dragon, beneath the low, dark beams of the back room that we now called our own, and which we were rapidly expanding to fill, stuffing ourselves into the dusty eaves: Thomas, who liked to lounge in a horizontal position whenever he wasn't hoisting tankards of ale or bothering our hosts for more; William, whose frown lines deepened as he laboured over charts and maps spread out over a table, moving from that to his lectern and occasionally letting out a frustrated gasp, waving Thomas and his ale-slopping tankard away whenever he lurched too close; Charles, my right-hand man, who took a seat beside me whenever I was in the room, and whose devotion I felt sometimes as a burden, at other times as a great source of strength; and now, of course, Dr Church, who had spent the last couple of days recuperating from his injuries in a bed that had been begrudgingly provided for him by Cornelius. We had left Benjamin to it; he had dressed his own wounds, and when he at last rose, he assured us that none of the injuries to his face were likely to be permanent.

I had spoken to him two days before, when I interrupted him in the process of dressing the worst of his wounds, certainly the most painful-looking: a flap of skin that Cutter had removed.

'So, a question for you,' I said, still feeling I hadn't quite got the measure of the man: 'Why medicine?'

He smiled grimly. 'I'm supposed to tell you I care for my fellow man, right? That I chose this path because it allows me to accomplish a greater good?'

'Are these things not true?'

'Perhaps. But that's not what guided me. No … for me it was a less abstract thing: I like money.'

'There are other paths to fortune,' I said.

'Aye. But what better ware to peddle than *life*? Nothing else is as precious – nor so desperately craved. And no price is too great for the man or woman who fears an abrupt and permanent end.'

I winced. 'Your words are cruel, Benjamin.'

‘But true as well.’

Confused, I asked, ‘You took an oath to help people, did you not?’

‘I abide by the oath, which makes no mention of price. I merely require compensation – fair compensation – for my services.’

‘And if they lack the required funds?’

‘Then there are others who will serve them. Does a baker grant free bread to a beggar? Does the tailor offer a dress to the woman who cannot afford to pay? No. Why should I?’

‘You said it yourself,’ I said: ‘Nothing is more precious than life.’

‘Indeed. All the more reason one should ensure one has the means to preserve it.’

I looked at him askance. He was a young man – younger than me. I wondered, had I been like him once?

ii

Later, my thoughts returned to matters most pressing. Silas would want revenge for what had happened at the warehouse, we all knew that; and it was just a matter of time before he struck at us. We were in the Green Dragon, perhaps the most visible spot in the city, so he knew where we were when he wanted to launch his strike. In the meantime, I had enough experienced swordsmen to give him pause for thought and I wasn’t minded to run or go into hiding.

William had told Benjamin what we were planning – to curry favour with the Mohawk by going up against the slaver – and Benjamin leaned forward now. ‘Johnson has told me what you intend,’ he said. ‘As it happens, the man who held me is the same one you seek. His name is Silas Thatcher.’

Inwardly, I cursed myself for not having made the connection. Of course. Beside me, the penny had dropped with Charles, too.

‘That fancy lad is a slaver?’ he said disbelievingly.

‘Don’t let his velvet tongue deceive you,’ said Benjamin, nodding. ‘A crueller and more vicious creature I’ve never known.’

‘What can you tell me of his operation?’ I asked.

‘He hosts at least a hundred men, more than half of whom are redcoats.’

‘All of this for some slaves?’

At this Benjamin laughed. ‘Hardly. The man is a commander in the King’s Troop, in charge of the Southgate Fort.’

Perplexed, I said, ‘But if Britain stands any chance of pushing back the French, she must *ally* with the natives – not enslave them.’

‘Silas is loyal only to his purse,’ said William from his lectern perch. ‘That his actions harm the Crown is irrelevant. So long as there are buyers for his product, he’ll continue to procure it.’

‘All the more reason to stop him, then,’ I said grimly.

‘My days are spent in congress with the locals – attempting to convince them that we’re the ones they should trust,’ added William; ‘that the French are merely using them as tools, to be abandoned once they’ve won.’

‘Your words must lose their strength when held against the reality of Silas’s actions.’ I sighed.

‘I’ve tried to explain that he does not represent us,’ he said with a rueful look. ‘But he wears the red coat. He commands a fort. I must appear to them either a liar or a fool … Likely both.’

‘Take heart, brother,’ I assured him. ‘When we deliver them his head, they will know your words were true. Firstly, we need to find a way inside the fort. Let me think on it. In the meantime, I’ll attend to our final recruit.’

At this, Charles perked up. ‘John Pitcairn’s our man. I’ll take you to him.’

iii

We found ourselves at a military encampment outside the city, where redcoats diligently checked those entering and leaving. These were Braddock’s men, and I wondered if I’d recognize any from my campaigns all those years ago.

I doubted it; his regime was too brutal, his men mercenaries, ex-convicts, men on the run who never stayed in one place for long. One stepped forward now, looking unshaven and shabby despite his redcoat uniform.

‘State your business,’ he said, as his eyes ranged over us, not much liking what he saw.

I was about to answer when Charles stepped forward, indicated me and said to the guard, ‘New recruit.’

The sentry stood to one side. ‘More kindling for the pyre, eh?’ he smirked. ‘Go on then.’

We moved through the gates into the camp.

‘How did you manage that?’ I said to Charles.

‘Did you forget, sir? My commission is with General Braddock – when I’m not attending to you, of course.’

A cart on its way out of the camp trundled past, led by a man in a wide-brimmed hat, and we stepped aside for a group of washerwomen who crossed our path. Tents were dotted around the site, over which hung a low blanket of smoke from fires around the campsite, tended to by men and children, camp

followers whose job it was to brew coffee and make food for their imperial masters. Washing hung on lines stretched from canopies at the front of the tents; civilians loaded crates of supplies on to wooden carts, watched over by officers on horseback. We saw a knot of troops struggling with a cannon stuck in the mud and more men stacking crates, while in the main square was a troop of twenty or thirty redcoats being put through its paces by an officer screaming barely intelligibly.

Looking around, it struck me that the camp was unmistakably the work of the Braddock I knew: busy and ordered, a hive of industry, a crucible of discipline. Any visitor would have thought it a credit to the British Army and to its commander, but if you looked harder, or if you knew Braddock of old, as I did, you could sense the resentment that pervaded the place: the men gave off a begrudging air about their activities. They worked not out of a sense of pride in their uniform but under the yoke of brutality.

Talking of which … We were approaching a tent and, as we grew closer to it, I heard, with a crawling and deeply unpleasant sensation in the pit of my stomach, that the voice I could hear shouting belonged to Braddock.

When was the last time I'd seen him? Several years ago, when I'd left the Coldstreams, and never had I been so pleased to turn my back on a man as I had been with Braddock that day. I'd departed the company swearing I would do my utmost to see to it that he answered for the crimes I'd witnessed during my time with him – crimes of cruelty and brutality. But I'd reckoned without the ties that bind the Order; I'd reckoned without Reginald's unswerving loyalty to him; and, in the end, I'd had to accept that Braddock was going to continue as he always had. I didn't like it. But I had to accept it. The answer was simply to steer clear of him.

Right now, though, I couldn't avoid him.

He was inside his tent as we entered, in the middle of lecturing a man who was about my age, dressed in civilian clothes but obviously a military man. This was John Pitcairn. He was standing there, taking the full blast of Braddock's rage – a rage I knew so well – as the general screamed: '… were you planning to announce yourself? Or did you hope my men wouldn't notice your arrival?'

I liked him immediately. I liked the unblinking way he responded, his Scots accent measured and calm, unintimidated by Braddock as he replied, 'Sir, if you'd allow me to explain …'

Time had not been kind to Braddock, though. His face was ruddier than ever, his hair receding. He became even more red-faced now, as he replied, 'Oh, by all means. I should like very much to hear this.'

‘I have not deserted, sir,’ protested Pitcairn, ‘I am here under Commander Amherst’s orders.’

But Braddock was in no mood to be impressed by the name of Commander Jeffrey Amherst; and, if anything, his mood darkened.

‘Show me a letter bearing his seal and you might be spared the gallows,’ he snarled.

‘I have no such thing,’ replied Pitcairn, swallowing – the only sign of nerves he’d shown; perhaps thinking of the noose tightening around his neck – ‘the nature of my work, sir … it’s …’

Braddock reared back as though bored of the whole facade – and might well have been about to order Pitcairn’s summary execution – when I took the opportunity to step forward.

‘It’s not the sort of thing best put to paper,’ I said.

Braddock turned to look at me with a jerky movement, seeing Charles and I there for the first time and taking us in with varying degrees of irritation. Charles, he didn’t mind so much. Me? Put it this way: the antipathy was mutual.

‘Haytham,’ he said simply, my name like a swear word on his lips.

‘*General* Braddock,’ I returned, without bothering to hide my distaste for his new rank.

He looked from me to Pitcairn and, perhaps, at last, made the connection. ‘I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised. Wolves often travel in packs.’

‘Master Pitcairn won’t be here for a few weeks,’ I told him, ‘and I shall return him to his proper post once our work is finished.’

Braddock shook his head. I did my best to hide my smile and succeeded, mainly, in keeping my glee internal. He was furious, not only that his authority had been undermined but, worse, that it had been undermined by me.

‘The devil’s work, no doubt,’ he said. ‘It’s bad enough my superiors have insisted I grant you use of Charles. But they said nothing about this traitor. You will not have him.’

I sighed. ‘Edward …’ I began.

But Braddock was signalling to his men. ‘We are done here. See these gentlemen out,’ he said.

iv

‘Well, that didn’t go as I expected,’ sighed Charles.

We were once again outside the walls, with the camp behind us and Boston ahead of us, stretching away to glittering sea on the horizon, the masts and sails of boats in the harbour. At a pump in the shade of a cherry tree, we stopped and

leaned on the wall, from where we could watch the comings and goings at the camp without attracting attention.

'And, to think, I used to call Edward a brother …' I said ruefully.

It had been a long time ago now, and difficult to recall, but it was true. There was a time when I'd looked up to Braddock, thought of him and Reginald as my friends and confederates. Now, I actively despised Braddock. And Reginald?

I still wasn't sure about him.

'What now?' asked Charles. 'They'll chase us off if we try and return.'

Gazing into the camp, I could see Braddock striding out of his tent, shouting as usual, gesticulating at an officer – one of his hand-picked mercenaries, no doubt – who came scuttling over. In his wake came John. He was still alive, at least; Braddock's temper had been either abated or directed somewhere else. Towards me, probably.

As we watched, the officer gathered the troops we'd seen drilling on the barracks square and organized them into a patrol, then, with Braddock at their head, began leading them out of the camp. Other troops and followers scurried out of their way, and the gate, which had previously been thronged with people, promptly cleared to allow the marchers through. They passed us by, a hundred yards or so away, and we watched them between the low-hanging branches of the cherry tree, as they made their way down the hill and towards the outskirts of the city, proudly bearing the Union flag.

A strange kind of peace descended in their wake, and I pushed myself off the wall and said to Charles, 'Come along.'

We stayed more than two hundred yards behind, and even then we could hear the sound of Braddock's voice, which, if anything, began to increase in volume as we made our way into the city. Even on the move he had the air of someone who was holding court, but what quickly became clear was that this was a recruitment mission. Braddock began by approaching a blacksmith, ordering the squad to watch and learn. All signs of his former fury were gone and he wore a warm smile to address the man, more in the manner of a concerned uncle than of the heartless tyrant he really was.

'You seem in low spirits, my friend,' he said, heartily. 'What's wrong?'

Charles and I stayed some distance away. Charles in particular kept his head low and remained out of sight, from fear of being recognized. I strained my ears to hear the blacksmith's reply.

'Business has been poor as of late,' he said. 'I have lost my stall and wares both.'

Braddock threw up his hands as though this were an easily solved problem, because …

‘What if I told you I could wipe your troubles away?’ he said.

‘I’d be wary, for one –’

‘Fair enough! But hear me out. The French and their savage companions lay waste to the countryside. The king has commissioned men such as me to raise an army that we might force them back. Join my expedition, and you will be richly compensated. Just a few weeks of your time, and you’ll return loaded with coin and able to open a new store – bigger and better!’

As they were talking, I noticed officers ordering members of the patrol to approach other citizens and start the same patter. Meanwhile, the blacksmith was saying, ‘Truly?’

Braddock was already handing him commission papers, which he’d fished from his jacket.

‘See for yourself,’ he said proudly, as though he were handing the man gold, rather than papers to enlist in the most brutal and dehumanizing army I had ever known.

‘I’ll do it,’ said the poor, gullible blacksmith. ‘Only tell me where to sign!’

Braddock walked on, leading us to a public square, where he stood to deliver a short speech, and more of his men began wandering off.

‘Hear me out, good people of Boston,’ he announced, in the tone of an avuncular gent about to impart great news. ‘The king’s army has need of strong and loyal men. Dark forces gather to the north, desirous of our land and its great bounty. I come before you today with a request: if you value your possessions, your families, your very lives – then join us. Take up arms in service to God and country both, that we might defend all we have created here.’

Some of the townspeople shrugged their shoulders and moved on; others conferred with their friends. Still others approached the redcoats, presumably keen to lend their services – and earn some money. I couldn’t help but notice a definite correlation between how poor they looked and how likely they were to be moved by Braddock’s speech.

Sure enough, I overheard him talking to his officer. ‘Where shall we head next?’

‘Perhaps down to Marlborough?’ replied the trusty lieutenant, who, though he was too far away for me to see properly, had a familiar-sounding voice.

‘No,’ replied Braddock, ‘its residents are too content. Their homes are nice; their days untroubled.’

‘What of Lyn or Ship Street?’

‘Yes. Those fresh arrived are often soon in dire straits. They’re more likely to seize upon an opportunity to fatten their purses and feed their young.’

Not far away stood John Pitcairn. I wanted to get closer to him. Looking at the surrounding redcoats, I realized that what I needed was a uniform.

Pity the poor soul who peeled off from the group to relieve himself. It was Braddock's lieutenant. He sauntered away from the group, shouldered his way past two well-dressed women in bonnets and snarled when they tutted his way – doing a great job of winning local hearts and minds in the name of His Majesty.

At a distance, I followed, until he came to the end of the street, where there was a squat wooden building, a storehouse of some kind, and, with a glance to make sure he wasn't being watched, he leaned his musket against the timber then undid the buttons of his britches to have a piss.

Of course, he *was* being watched. By me. Checking to see there were no other redcoats nearby, I drew close, wrinkling my nose at the acrid stench; many a redcoat had relieved himself in this particular spot, it seemed. Then I engaged my blade with a soft *chk*, which he heard, tensing slightly as he pissed, but not turning.

'Whoever that is, he better have a good reason for standing behind me when I'm having a piss,' he said, shaking then putting his cock back in his britches. And I recognized his voice. It was the executioner. It was …

'Slater,' I said.

'That's my name: don't wear it out. And who might you be?'

He was pretending to have trouble with his buttons, but I could see his right hand straying towards the hilt of his sword.

'You might remember me. My name is Haytham Kenway.'

Again he tensed, and his head straightened. 'Haytham Kenway,' he rasped. 'Indeed – now there's a name to conjure with, so it is. I had hoped I'd seen the last of you.'

'And me of you. Turn around, please.'

A horse and cart passed in the mud as, slowly, Slater turned to face me, his eyes going to the blade at my wrist. 'You an Assassin now, are ya?' he sneered.

'A Templar, Slater, like your boss.'

He sneered. 'Your lot have no attraction for General Braddock any more.'

Just as I'd suspected. That was why he'd been trying to sabotage my efforts to recruit a team for Reginald's mission. Braddock had turned against us.

'Go for your sword,' I told Slater.

His eyes flickered. 'You'll run me through if I do.'

I nodded. 'I can't kill you in cold blood. I'm not your general.'

'No,' he said, 'you're a fraction of the man he is.'

And he went for his sword …

A second later the man who had once tried to hang me, whom I had watched help slaughter a whole family at the Siege of Bergen op Zoom, lay dead at my feet, and I looked down at his still-twitching corpse, thinking only that I needed to take his uniform before he bled all over it.

I took it and rejoined Charles, who looked at me with raised eyebrows. ‘Well, you certainly look the part,’ he said.

I gave him an ironic smile. ‘Now to make Pitcairn aware of our plans. When I give you the signal, you’re to cause a fracas. We’ll use the distraction to slip away.’

Meanwhile, Braddock was issuing orders. ‘All right men, we move,’ he said, and I used the opportunity to slip into the ranks of the patrol, keeping my head down. Braddock, I knew, would be concentrating on the recruitment and not on his men; equally, I trusted that the men of the patrol would be so terrified of incurring his wrath that they would also be too concerned with enlisting new men to notice a new face in their ranks. I fell in beside Pitcairn and, my voice low, said, ‘Hello again, Jonathan.’

By my side, he started slightly, looked at me and exclaimed, ‘Master Kenway?’

I shushed him with a hand and glanced up to ensure we hadn’t attracted any unwanted attention before continuing: ‘It wasn’t easy slipping in … but here I am, come to rescue you.’

This time he kept his voice down. ‘You don’t honestly think we can get away with this?’

I smiled. ‘Have you no faith in me?’

‘I hardly know you –’

‘You know enough.’

‘Look,’ he whispered, ‘I’d very much like to help. But you heard Braddock. If he catches wind of this, you and I are both finished.’

‘I’ll take care of Braddock,’ I reassured him.

He looked at me. ‘How?’ he asked.

I gave him a look to say I knew exactly what I was doing, put my fingers in my mouth and whistled loudly.

It was the signal Charles had been waiting for, and he came rushing from between two buildings into the street. He’d taken his shirt off and was using it to obscure his face; the rest of his clothes were in disarray, too: he’d used mud on himself so that he looked nothing like the army officer he truly was. He looked, in fact, like a madman, and promptly behaved like one, standing in front of the patrol, which came to a disorganized halt, too surprised or bemused even to raise weapons, as Charles began to shout, ‘Oi! You’re thieves and scoundrels one and

all! You swear the empire will … will reward and honour us! But in the end you deliver only death! And for what? Rocks and ice, trees and streams? A few dead Frenchmen? Well, we don't want it! Don't need it! So take your false promises, your dangled purses, your uniforms and guns – take all those things that you hold so dear, and shove them up your arse!'

The redcoats looked at one another, open-mouthed with disbelief, so taken aback that, for a moment, I worried they weren't going to react at all. Even Braddock, who was some distance away, simply stood, his jaw hanging open, not sure whether to be angry or amused by this unexpected outburst of pure lunacy.

Were they simply going to turn around and carry on their way? Perhaps Charles had the same worry, because all of a sudden he added, 'Fie on you and your false war,' then added his crowning touch. He reached, scooped up a piece of horseshit and flung it in the general direction of the group, most of whom turned smartly away. The lucky ones, that was – General Edward Braddock not included.

He stood, with horseshit on his uniform, no longer undecided about whether to be amused or angry. Now he was just angry, and his roar seemed to shake the leaves in the trees: '*After him!*'

Some of the men peeled away from the group and went to grab Charles, who had already turned and was now running, past a general store then left from the street between the store and a tavern.

This was our chance. But instead of seizing it, John merely said, 'Dammit.'

'What's wrong?' I said. 'Now's our chance to escape.'

'I'm afraid not. Your man just led them into a dead end. We need to rescue him.'

Inwardly, I groaned. So it *was* a rescue mission – just not of the man I had intended to rescue. And I, too, went running towards the passageway: only I had no intention of satisfying our noble general's honour; I simply had to keep Charles from harm.

I was too late. By the time I got there he was already under arrest, and I stood back, cursing silently as he was dragged back into the main thoroughfare and brought to stand before a seething General Braddock, who was already reaching for his sword when I decided things had gone too far.

'Unhand him, Edward.'

He turned to me. If it was possible for his face to darken more than it already had, then it did. Around us, breathless redcoats gave each other confused looks, while Charles, held by a redcoat on either side and still shirtless, shot me a grateful look.

‘You again!’ spat Braddock, furious.

‘Did you think I wouldn’t return?’ I replied equably.

‘I’m more surprised about how easily you were unmasked,’ he gloated. ‘Going soft, it seems.’

I had no wish to trade insults with him. ‘Let us go – and John Pitcairn with us,’ I said.

‘I will not have my authority challenged,’ said Braddock

‘Nor I.’

His eyes blazed. Had we really lost him? For a moment I pictured myself sitting down with him, showing him the book and watching the transformation come over him, just as it had with me. Could he feel that same sense of suddenly knowing that I had? Could he return to us?

‘Put them all in chains,’ he snapped.

No, I decided he couldn’t.

And, again, I wished for Reginald’s presence, because he would have nipped this argument in the bud: he would have prevented what happened next.

Which is that I decided I could take them; and I made my move. In a trice my blade was out and the nearest redcoat died with a look of surprise on his face as I ran him through. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Braddock dart to the side, draw his own sword and yell at another man, who reached for his pistol, already primed. John reached him before I did, his sword flashing down and chopping at the man’s wrist, not quite severing the hand but slicing through the bone, so that for a moment his hand flapped at the end of his arm and the pistol fell harmlessly to the ground.

Another trooper came at me from my left and we exchanged blows – one, two, three. I pushed forward until his back was against the wall, and my final thrust was between the straps across his tunic, into his heart. I wheeled and met a third man, deflected his blow and swept my blade across his midriff, sending him to the dirt. With the back of my hand I wiped blood from my face in time to see John run another man through and Charles, who had snatched a sword from one of his captors, finish the other with a few confident strokes.

Then the fight was over and I faced the last man standing – and the last man standing was General Edward Braddock.

It would have been so easy. So easy to have ended this here. His eyes told me that he knew – he knew that I had it in my heart to kill him. Perhaps, for the first time, he realized that any ties that had once bound us, those of the Templar, or mutual respect for Reginald, no longer existed.

I let the moment hang then dropped my sword. ‘I stay my hand today because you were once my brother,’ I told him, ‘and a better man than this. But should

we cross paths again, all debts will be forgotten.'

I turned to John. 'You're free now, John.'

The three of us – me, John and Charles – began to walk away.

'Traitor!' called Braddock. 'Go on then. Join them on their fool's errand. And when you find yourself lying broken and dying at the bottom of some dark pit, I pray my words today are the last that you remember.'

And, with that, he strode off, stepping over the corpses of his men and shouldering his way past bystanders. You were never too far from a redcoat patrol on Boston's streets and, with Braddock able to call on reinforcements, we decided to make ourselves scarce. As he left, I cast my eye over the bodies of the felled redcoats lying in the mud and reflected that, as recruitment drives go, it had not been the most successful afternoon.

No wonder townsfolk gave us a wide berth as we hurried back along the streets towards the Green Dragon. We were mud-splattered and bloodstained, and Charles was struggling back into his clothes. John, meanwhile, was curious to know about my animosity towards Braddock, and I told him about the slaughter at the skiff, finishing by saying, 'Things were never the same after that. We campaigned together a few more times, but each outing was more disturbing than the last. He killed and killed: enemy or ally, civilian or soldier, guilty or innocent – it mattered not. If he perceived someone to be an obstacle, they died. He maintained that violence was a more efficient solution. It became his mantra. And it broke my heart.'

'We should stop him,' said John, glancing behind, as though we might try at once.

'I suppose you're right … But I maintain a foolish hope that he might yet be saved and brought back round to reason. I know, I know … it's a silly thing, to believe that one so drenched in death might suddenly change.'

Or was it so silly? I wondered, as we walked. After all, hadn't I changed?

14 July 1754

i

By staying at the Green Dragon, we were in the right place to hear of any rumblings against us, and my man Thomas kept his ear to the ground. Not that it was much of a chore for him, of course: listening out for any signs of a plot against us meant supping ale while he eavesdropped on conversations and pressed others for gossip. He was very good at that. He needed to be. We had made enemies: Silas, of course; but, most worryingly, General Edward Braddock.

Last night, I had sat at the desk in my room to write my journal. My hidden blade was on the table beside me, my sword within easy reach in case Braddock launched his inevitable retributive strike straight away, and I knew that this was how it would be from now on: sleeping with one eye open, weapons never far from hand, always looking over our shoulders, every strange face belonging to a potential enemy. Just the thought of it was exhausting, but what other choice was there? According to Slater, Braddock had renounced the Templar order. He was a loose cannon now, and the one thing worse than a loose cannon is a loose cannon with an army at his disposal.

I could at least console myself with knowing that I now had a hand-picked team and, once again, we were assembled in the back room, boosted by the addition of John Pitcairn, a more formidable proposition for either of our two opponents.

As I entered the room, they rose to greet me – even Thomas, who seemed more sober than usual. I cast my eye over them: Benjamin's wounds had healed nicely; John seemed to have cast off the shackles of his commission with Braddock, his preoccupied air replaced by a new lightness of spirit; Charles was still a British Army officer and was worried that Braddock might recall him and, consequently, when not looking down his nose at Thomas wore a concerned look; while William stood at his lectern holding a quill in his hand, still hard at work comparing the markings on the amulet with the book and his own maps

and graphs, still perplexed, the telling details still eluding him. I had an idea about that.

I gestured at them to take their seats, and sat among them.

‘Gentlemen, I believe I’ve found the solution to our problem. Or, rather, Odysseus has.’

The mention of the Greek hero’s name had a somewhat varied effect on my companions and, as William, Charles and Benjamin all nodded sagely, John and Thomas looked somewhat confused, Thomas being the least self-conscious.

‘Odysseus? Is he a new guy?’ He belched.

‘The Greek hero, you lobcock,’ said Charles, disgusted.

‘Allow me to explain,’ I said. ‘We’ll enter Silas’s fort under the pretence of kinship. Once inside, we spring our trap. Free the captives and kill the slaver.’

I watched as they absorbed my plan. Thomas was the first to speak. ‘Dodgy, dodgy,’ he grinned. ‘I like it.’

‘Then let us begin,’ I continued. ‘First, we need to find ourselves a convoy …’

ii

Charles and I were on a rooftop overlooking one of Boston’s public squares, both dressed as redcoats.

I looked down at my own uniform. There was still a little of Slater’s blood on my brown leather belt and a stain on the white stockings, but otherwise I looked the part; Charles, too, even though he picked at his uniform.

‘I’d forgotten how uncomfortable these uniforms are.’

‘Necessary, I’m afraid,’ I said, ‘in order to properly effect our deception.’

I looked at him. He wouldn’t have to suffer for long at least. ‘The convoy should be here soon,’ I told him. ‘We’ll attack on my signal.’

‘Understood, sir,’ replied Charles.

In the square below us an upturned cart blocked the far exit, and two men were huffing and puffing as they tried to turn it the right way up again.

Or *pretending* to huff and puff and turn the cart the right way up, I should say, because the two men were Thomas and Benjamin and the cart had been deliberately tipped over by all four of us a few moments before, strategically placed to block the exit. Not far away from it were John and William, who waited in the shadows of a nearby blacksmith’s hut, sitting on upturned buckets with their hats pulled down low over their eyes, a couple of smithies taking a break, lazing the day away, watching the world go by.

The trap was set. I put my spyglass to my eye and looked over the landscape beyond the square, and this time I saw them – the convoy, a squad of nine

redcoats making its way towards us. One of them was driving a hay cart and, beside him on the board, was …

I adjusted the focus. It was a Mohawk woman – a *beautiful* Mohawk woman, who, despite the fact that she was chained in place wore a proud, defiant expression and sat straight, in marked contrast to the redcoat who sat beside her driving, whose shoulders were hunched and who had a long-stemmed pipe in his mouth. She had a bruise on her face, I realized, and was surprised to feel a surge of anger at the sight of it. I wondered how long ago they'd caught her and how, indeed, they'd managed it. Evidently, she'd put up a fight.

'Sir,' said Charles from by my side, prompting me, 'hadn't you better give the signal?'

I cleared my throat. 'Of course, Charles,' I said, and put my fingers in my mouth and gave a low whistle, watching as my comrades below exchanged 'Ready' signals, and Thomas and Benjamin kept up the pretence of trying to upturn the cart.

We waited – we waited until the redcoats marched into the square and found the cart blocking their way.

'What the hell is this?' said one of the front guards.

'A thousand pardons, sirs – seems we've had ourselves an unhappy little accident,' said Thomas, with open hands and an ingratiating smile.

The lead redcoat took note of Thomas's accent and at once assumed a contemptuous look. He went a shade of purple, not quite angry enough to match the colour of his tunic, but deep enough.

'Get it sorted – and quickly,' he snapped, and Thomas touched a servile hand to his forelock before turning back to help Benjamin with the cart.

''Course, milord, at once,' he said.

Charles and I, now on our bellies, watched. John and William sat with their faces hidden but they, too, watched the scene as the redcoats, rather than simply marching around the cart or even – God forbid – helping Thomas and Benjamin to put the cart straight, stood and looked on as the lead guard became more and more furious, until his temper finally snapped.

'Look – either get your cart right, or we're riding through it.'

'Please, don't.' I saw Thomas's eyes dart up to the rooftop where we lay, then across to where William and John sat ready, their hands now on the hilts of their swords, and he spoke the action phrase, which was 'We're nearly finished.'

In one movement Benjamin had drawn his sword and run through the nearest man, while, before the lead guard had a chance to react, Thomas had done the same, a dagger appearing from within his sleeve which was just as quickly embedded into the lead guard's eye.

At the same time, William and John burst from cover, and three men fell beneath their blades, while Charles and I jumped from above, catching those nearest by surprise: four men died. We didn't even give them the dignity of breathing their last breath with dignity. Worried about getting their clothes stained with blood, we were already stripping the dying men of their uniforms. In moments we had pulled the bodies into some stables, shut and bolted the door and we then stood in the square, six redcoats who had taken the place of nine. A new convoy.

I looked around. The square had not been busy before, but now it was deserted. We had no idea who might have been a witness to the ambush – colonials who hated the British and were glad to see them fall? British Army sympathizers who even now were on their way to Southgate Fort to warn Silas about what had happened? We had no time to lose.

I jumped into the driver's seat, and the Mohawk woman pulled away slightly – as far as her manacles would allow, anyway – and gave me a wary but mutinous look.

'We're here to help you,' I tried to reassure her. 'Along with those held within Southgate Fort.'

'Free me then,' she said.

Regretfully, I told her, 'Not until we're inside. I can't chance an inspection at the gate going wrong,' and was rewarded with a disgusted look, as though to say it was just as she'd expected.

'I'll see you safe,' I insisted, 'you have my word.' I shook the reins and the horses began to move, my men walking either side of me.

'Do you know anything of Silas's operation?' I asked the Mohawk woman. 'How many men we might expect? The nature of their defences?'

But she said nothing. 'You must be pretty important to him if you were given your own escort,' I pressed, and still she ignored me. 'I wish you'd trust us … though I suppose it's only natural for you to be wary. So be it.' When she still didn't answer, I realized my words were wasted, and decided to shut up.

When at last we reached the gates, a guard stepped forward. 'Hold,' he said.

I tightened the reins and we drew to a stop, me and my redcoats. Looking past the prisoner, I tipped my hat to the guards: 'Evening, gentlemen.'

The sentry was in no mood for pleasantries, I could tell. 'State your business,' he said flatly, staring at the Mohawk woman with interested, lustful eyes. She returned his stare with a venomous look of her own.

For a moment I mused that when I'd first arrived in Boston I'd wanted to see what changes British rule had wrought on this country, what effect our governance had had on its people. For the native Mohawk, it was clear to see

that any effect had not been for the good. We talked piously of saving this land; instead, we were corrupting it.

I indicated the woman now. ‘Delivery for Silas,’ I said, and the guard nodded, licked his lips then rapped on the door for it to open, for us to trundle slowly forward. Inside, the fort was quiet. We found ourselves near to the battlements, low dark-stone walls where cannons were ranged to look out over Boston, towards the sea, and redcoats with muskets slung over their shoulders patrolled back and forth. The focus of their attention was outside the walls; they feared an attack from the French and, looking down from their battlements, hardly gave us a second glance as we trundled in on our cart and, trying to look as casual as possible, made our way to a secluded section, where the first thing I did was to cut the woman free.

‘See? I’m freeing you, just as I said I would. Now, if you’ll allow me to explain …’

But her answer was no. With a final glare at me she had leapt from the cart and disappeared into the darkness, leaving me to stare after her with the distinct feeling of unfinished business; wanting to explain myself to her; wanting to spend more time with her.

Thomas went to go after her, but I stopped him. ‘Let her go,’ I said.

‘But she’ll give us away,’ he protested.

I looked at where she had been – already she was a memory, a ghost. ‘No, she won’t,’ I said, and got down, casting a look around to make sure we were alone in the quadrangle then gathering the others to give them their orders: free the captives and avoid detection. They nodded grimly, each of them committed to the task.

‘What of Silas?’ asked Benjamin.

I thought of the snickering man I had seen at the warehouse, who had left Benjamin to the mercy of Cutter. I remembered Benjamin’s pledge to have his head, and looked at my friend now. ‘He dies,’ I said.

I watched as the men melted away into the night, and decided to keep a close watch on Charles, my pupil. And saw as he approached a group of redcoats and introduced himself. I glanced across the quadrangle to see that Thomas had inveigled himself with another of the patrols. William and John, meanwhile, were walking casually in the direction of a building I thought was probably the stockade, where the prisoners were kept, where a guard was even now shifting and moving to block their way. I looked to check that the other guards were being kept occupied by Charles and Thomas and, when I was satisfied, gave John a surreptitious thumbs-up then saw him exchange a quick word with William as they came to the guard.

‘Can I help you?’ I heard the guard say, his voice drifting over the quad just as John kneed him in the bollocks. With a low groan like an animal in a trap, he dropped his pikestaff and fell to his knees. Straight away John was feeling at his waist and retrieving a key ring then, with his back to the quad, he opened the door, grabbed a torch from a bracket outside and disappeared inside.

I glanced around. None of the guards had seen what was going on at the stockade. Those on the battlements were diligently staring out to sea; those inside had their attention diverted by Charles and Thomas.

Looking back at the door of the stockade, I saw John reappear then usher out the first of the prisoners.

And suddenly one of the troops on the battlements saw what was happening. ‘Oi, you there, what’s your game?’ he shouted, already levelling his musket, and the cry went up. Immediately I dashed over to the battlements, where the first redcoat was about to pull the trigger, bounded up the stone steps and was upon him, thrusting my blade under his jaw in one clean move. I dropped into a crouch and let his body fall over me, springing from beneath it to spear the next guard in his heart. A third man had his back to me, drawing a bead on William, but I whipped my blade across the backs of his legs then delivered the *coup de grâce* to the back of his neck when he fell. Not far away, William thanked me with a raised hand then turned to meet another guard. His sword swung as a redcoat fell beneath the blade, and when he turned to meet a second man his face was stained with blood.

In moments, all of the guards were dead, but the door to one of the outbuildings had opened and Silas had appeared, already angry. ‘An hour of quiet was all I asked,’ he roared. ‘Instead I’m awakened not ten minutes later by this cacophonous madness. I expect an explanation – and it had best be good.’

He was stopped in his tracks, his outburst dying on his lips as the colour drained from his face. All around the quad were the bodies of his men, and his head jerked as he looked across to the stockade, where the door hung open, natives pouring out and John urging them to move more quickly.

Silas drew his sword as more men appeared from behind him. ‘How?’ he shrieked. ‘How did this happen? My precious merchandise set free. It’s unacceptable. Rest assured, I’ll have the heads of those responsible. But first … first we clean up this mess.’

His guards were pulling on tunics, strapping swords to their waists, priming muskets. The quadrangle, empty but for corpses a moment ago, was suddenly filled with more troops, eager for retribution. Silas was beside himself, screaming at them, frantically waving at the troops to take up their arms, calming himself as he continued: ‘Seal the fort. Kill any who try to escape. I

don’t care if they be one of us or one of … *them*. To approach the gate is to be made a corpse! Am I understood?’

The fighting continued. Charles, Thomas, William, John and Benjamin moved among the men and made the most of their disguises. The men they attacked were reduced to fighting among themselves, not sure which man in an army uniform was friend and which an enemy. The natives, unarmed, sheltered to wait the fighting out, even as a group of Silas’s redcoats formed a line at the entrance to the fort. I saw my chance – Silas had positioned himself to one side of his troops and was exhorting them to be ruthless. Silas, it was clear, did not care who died as long as his precious ‘merchandise’ was not allowed to escape, as long as his pride was not damaged in the process.

I motioned to Benjamin, and we moved up close to Silas, saw that he had spotted us out of the corner of his eye. For a moment I could see the confusion play across his features, until he realized that, firstly, we were two of the interlopers and, secondly, he had no means of escape, as we stood blocking him from reaching the rest of his men. To all intents and purposes we looked like a pair of loyal bodyguards keeping him from harm.

‘You don’t know me,’ I told him, ‘but I believe the two of you are well acquainted …’ I said, and Benjamin Church stepped forward.

‘I made a promise to you, Silas,’ said Benjamin, ‘one I intend to keep …’

It was over in seconds. Benjamin was far more merciful with Silas than Cutter had been with him. With their leader dead, the fort’s defence broke up, the gates opened and we allowed the rest of the redcoats to pour out. Behind them came the Mohawk prisoners, and I saw the woman from earlier. Rather than escaping, she’d stayed to help her people: She was courageous as well as beautiful and spirited. As she helped members of her tribe away from the accursed fort, our eyes met, and I found myself entranced by her. And then she was gone.

15 November 1754

i

It was freezing, and snow covered the ground all around us as we set off early this morning and rode towards Lexington in pursuit of …

Perhaps ‘obsession’ is too strong a word. ‘Preoccupation’, then: my ‘preoccupation’ with the Mohawk woman, from the cart. Specifically, with finding her.

Why?

If Charles had asked me, I’d have told him that I wanted to find her because I knew her English was good and I thought she would be a useful contact within the Mohawk to help locate the precursor site.

That’s what I would have said if Charles had asked me why I wanted to find her, and it would have been partly the truth. *Partly*.

Anyway, Charles and I took one of my expeditions, this one out to Lexington, when he said, ‘I’m afraid I have some bad news, sir.’

‘What is it, Charles?’

‘Braddock’s insisting I return to service under him. I’ve tried to beg off, to no avail,’ he said sadly.

‘No doubt he’s still angry about losing John – to say nothing of the shaming we gave him,’ I responded thoughtfully, wondering if I could have finished it then, when I had the chance. ‘Do as he asks. In the meantime, I’ll work on having you released.’

How? I wasn’t sure. After all, there was a time when I could have relied on a stiff letter from Reginald to change Braddock’s mind, but it had become clear that Braddock no longer had any affinity with our ways.

‘I’m sorry to trouble you,’ said Charles.

‘Not your fault,’ I replied.

I was going to miss him. After all, he had already done a lot to locate my mystery woman, who, according to him, was to be found outside Boston in Lexington, where she was apparently stirring up trouble against the British, who were led by Braddock. Who could blame her, after seeing her people imprisoned

by Silas? So Lexington was where we were – at a recently vacated hunting camp.

‘She’s not too far away,’ Charles told me. And did I imagine it, or did I feel my pulse quicken a little? It had been a long time since any woman had made me feel this way. My life had been spent either in studying or moving around and, as for women in my bed, there had been nobody serious: the occasional washerwoman during my service with the Coldstreams, waitresses, landlords’ daughters – women who had provided solace and comfort, physical and otherwise, but nobody I’d have described as at all special.

This woman, though: I had seen something in her eyes, as if she were something of a kindred spirit – another loner, another warrior, another bruised soul who looked at the world with weary eyes.

I studied the camp. ‘The fire’s only just been snuffed, the snow recently disturbed.’ I looked up. ‘She’s close.’

I dismounted but, when I saw Charles was about to do the same, I stopped him.

‘Best you return to Braddock, Charles, before he grows suspicious. I can handle things from here.’

He nodded, reined his horse round, and I watched as they left then turned my attention to the snow-covered ground around me, wondering about my *real* reason for sending him off. And knowing exactly what it was.

ii

I crept though the trees. It had begun to snow again, and the forest was strangely silent, but for the sound of my own breathing, which billowed in vapours in front of me. I moved fast but stealthily, and it wasn’t long before I saw her, or at least the back of her. She was kneeling in the snow, a musket leaning against a tree, as she examined a snare. I came closer, as quietly as I could, only to see her tense.

She’d heard me. God she was good.

And in the next instant she had rolled to her side, snatched up the musket, thrown a look behind her then taken off into the woods.

I ran after her. ‘Please stop running,’ I called as we flew through the snow-blanketed woodland. ‘I only wish to talk. I am not your enemy.’

But she kept on going. I dashed nimbly through the snow, moving fast and easily negotiating the terrain, but she was faster and next she took to the trees, raising herself off the hard-to-negotiate snow and swinging from branch the branch wherever she was able.

In the end, she took me further and further into the forest and would have escaped were it not for a piece of bad fortune. She tripped on a tree root, stumbled, fell, and I was upon her at once, but not to attack, to come to her aid, and I held up a hand, breathing hard as I managed to say, ‘Me. Haytham. I. Come. In. Peace.’

She looked at me as though she hadn’t understood a word I’d said. I felt the beginnings of a panic. Maybe I’d been wrong about her in the cart. Maybe she couldn’t speak English at all.

Until, suddenly, she replied with, ‘Are you touched in the head?’

Perfect English.

‘Oh … sorry …’

She gave a disgusted shake of her head.

‘What do you want?’

‘Well, your name, for one.’ My shoulders heaved as I gradually caught my breath, which was steaming in the freezing cold.

And then, after a period of indecision – I could see it playing across her face – she said, ‘I am Kaniehtí:io.’

‘Just call me Ziio,’ she said, when I tried and failed to repeat her name back to her. ‘Now tell me why it is you’re here.’

I reached around my neck and took off the amulet, to show her. ‘Do you know what this is?’

Without warning, she grabbed my arm. ‘You have one?’ she asked. For a second I was confused, until I realized she was looking not at the amulet, but at my hidden blade. I watched her for a moment, feeling what I can only describe as a strange mixture of emotions: pride, admiration, then trepidation as, accidentally, she ejected the blade. To her credit, though, she didn’t flinch, just looked up at me with wide brown eyes, and I felt myself fall a little deeper as she said, ‘I’ve seen your little secret.’

I smiled back, trying to look more confident than I felt, and raised the amulet, starting again.

‘This.’ I dangled it. ‘Do you know what it is?’

Taking it in her hand, she gazed at it. ‘Where did you get it?’

‘From an old friend,’ I said, thinking of Miko and offering a silent prayer for him. I wondered, should it have been him here instead of me, an Assassin instead of a Templar?

‘I’ve only seen such markings in one other place,’ she said, and I felt an instant thrill.

‘Where?’

‘It … it is forbidden for me to speak of it.’

I leaned towards her. I looked into her eyes, hoping to convince with the strength of my conviction. ‘I saved your people. Does this mean nothing to you?’

She said nothing.

‘Look,’ I pressed, ‘I am not the enemy.’

And perhaps she thought of the risks we had taken at the fort, how we had freed so many of her people from Silas. And maybe – maybe – she saw something in me she liked.

Either way, she nodded then replied, ‘Near here, there is a hill. On top of it grows a mighty tree. Come, we’ll see if you speak the truth.’

iii

She led me there, and indicated below us, where there was a town she told me was called Concord.

‘The town hosts soldiers who seek to drive my people from these lands. They are led by a man known as the Bulldog,’ she said.

The realization dawned. ‘Edward Braddock …’

She rounded on me. ‘You know him?’

‘He is no friend of mine,’ I assured her, and never had I been more sincere.

‘Every day, more of my people are lost to men like him,’ she said fiercely.

‘And I suggest we put a stop to it. Together.’

She looked hard at me. There was doubt in her eyes, but I could see hope as well. ‘What do you propose?’

Suddenly I knew. I knew exactly what had to be done.

‘We have to kill Edward Braddock.’

I let the information sink in. Then added, ‘But first we have to find him.’

We began to head down the hill towards Concord.

‘I don’t trust you,’ she said flatly.

‘I know.’

‘Yet you remain.’

‘That I might prove you wrong.’

‘It will not happen.’ Her jaw was set. She believed it. I had a long way to go with this mysterious, captivating woman.

In town, we approached the tavern, where I stopped her. ‘Wait here,’ I said. ‘A Mohawk woman is likely to raise suspicions – if not muskets.’

She shook her head, instead pulling up her hood. ‘This is hardly the first time I’ve been among your people, she said. ‘I can handle myself.’

I hoped so.

We entered to find groups of Braddock's men drinking with a ferocity that would have impressed Thomas Hickey, and we moved among them, eavesdropping on their conversations. What we discovered was that Braddock was on the move. The British planned to enlist the Mohawk to march further north and go against the French. Even the men seemed frightened of Braddock, I realized. All talk was of how merciless he could be, and how even his officers were scared of him. One name I overheard was George Washington. He was the only one brave enough to question the general, according to a pair of gossiping redcoats I eavesdropped upon. When I moved through to the back of the tavern, I found the self-same George Washington sitting with another officer at a secluded table, and loitered close by in order to listen in to their conversation.

'Tell me you've good news?' said one.

'General Braddock refused the offer. There will be no truce,' said the other.

'Dammit.'

'Why, George? What reason did he give?'

The man he called George – whom I took to be George Washington – replied, 'He said a diplomatic solution was no solution at all. That allowing the French to retreat would only delay an inevitable conflict – one in which they now have the upper hand.'

'There's merit in those words, much as I hate to admit it. Still … can't you see this is unwise?'

'It doesn't sit well with me either. We're far from home, with forces divided. Worse, I fear private bloodlust makes Braddock careless. It puts the men at risk. I'd rather not be delivering grim news to mothers and widows because the Bulldog wanted to prove a point.'

'Where is the general now?'

'Rallying the troops.'

'And then it's on to Fort Duquesne, I assume?'

'Eventually. The march north will surely take time.'

'At least this will be ended soon …'

'I tried, John.'

'I know, my friend. I know …'

Braddock has left to rally his troops, I told Ziio outside the tavern. 'And they're marching on Fort Duquesne. It'll be a while yet until they're ready, which gives us time to form a plan.'

'No need,' she said. 'We'll ambush him near the river. Go and gather your allies. I will do the same. I'll send word when it's time to strike.'

8 July 1755

It has been nearly eight months since Ziio told me to wait for her word, but at last it came, and we travelled to the Ohio Country, where the British were about to begin a major campaign against the French forts. Braddock's expedition was aimed at overthrowing Fort Duquesne.

We had all been busy in that time, and none more than Ziio, I discovered, when we did eventually meet and I saw that she had brought with her many troops, many of them natives.

'All these men are from many different tribes – united in their desire to see Braddock sent away,' she said. 'The Abenaki, the Lenape, the Shawnee.'

'And you?' I said to her, when the introductions had been made. 'Who do you stand for?'

A thin smile: 'Myself.'

'What would you have me do?' I said at last.

'You will help the others to prepare …'

She wasn't joking. I put my men to work and joined them building blockades, filling a cart with gunpowder in order to make a booby trap, until everything was in place and I found myself grinning, saying to Ziio, 'I can't wait to see the look on Braddock's face when the trap is finally sprung.'

She gave me a distrusting look. 'You take pleasure in this?'

'You're the one who asked me to help you kill a man.'

'It does not please me to do so. He is sacrificed so that the land and the people who live on it might be saved. What motivates you? Some past wrongs? A betrayal? Or is it simply the thrill of the hunt?'

Mollified, I said, 'You misread me.'

She indicated through the trees, towards the Monongahela River.

'Braddock's men will be here soon,' she said. 'We should prepare for their arrival.'

9 July 1755

i

A Mohawk scout on horseback quickly spoke some words I didn't understand but, as he gestured back down the valley towards the Monongahela, I could guess what he was saying: that Braddock's men had crossed the river and would soon be upon us. He left to inform the rest of the ambush, and Ziio, lying by my side, confirmed what I already knew.

'They come,' she said simply.

I'd been enjoying lying next to her in our hiding place, the proximity of her. So it was with a measure of regret that I looked out from beneath a fringe of undergrowth to see the regiment emerge from the tree line at the bottom of the hill. I heard it at the same time: a distant rumble growing louder which heralded the arrival of not a patrol, not a scouting party, but an entire regiment of Braddock's men. First came the officers on horseback, then the drummers and bandsmen, then the troops marching, then porters and camp followers guarding the baggage train. The entire column stretched back almost as far as the eye could see.

And, at the head of the regiment, the general himself, who sat, gently rocking with the rhythm of his horse, his freezing breath clouding the air ahead of him, and George Washington by his side.

Behind the officers the drummers kept up a steady beat, for which we were eternally grateful, because in the trees were French and Indian snipers. On the high ground were scores of men who lay on their bellies, the undergrowth pulled over them, waiting for the sign to attack: a hundred or more men waiting to spring the ambush; a hundred men who held their breath as, suddenly, General Braddock held up his hand, an officer on his other side barked an order, the drums stopped and the regiment came to a halt, horses whinnying and sneezing, pawing at the snowy, frozen ground, the column gradually descending into silence.

An eerie calm settled around the men in the column. In the ambush, we held our breath, and I'm sure every man and woman, like me, wondered if we'd been

discovered.

George Washington looked at Braddock then behind, where the rest of the column, officers, soldiers and followers stood waiting expectantly, then back at Braddock.

He cleared his throat.

‘Everything all right, sir?’ he asked.

Braddock took a deep breath. ‘Just savouring the moment,’ he replied, then took another deep breath and added: ‘No doubt many wonder why it is we’ve pushed so far west. These are wild lands, as yet untamed and unsettled. But it shall not always be so. In time, our holdings will no longer suffice, and that day is closer than you think. We must ensure that our people have ample room to grow and further prosper. Which means we need more land. The French understand this – and endeavour to prevent such growth. They skirt around our territory – erecting forts and forging alliances – awaiting the day they might strangle us with the noose they’ve built. This must not come to pass. We must sever the cord and send them back. This is why we ride. To offer them one last chance: the French will leave or they will die.’

By my side, Ziio gave me a look, and I could see that there was nothing she would like better than to prick the man’s pomposity straight away.

Sure enough. ‘Now is the time to strike,’ she hissed.

‘Wait,’ I said. When I turned my head I found she was looking at me, and our faces were just an inch or so apart. ‘To scatter the expedition is not enough. We must ensure Braddock fails. Else he is sure to try again.’

Kill him, I meant, and there would never be a better time to strike. I thought quickly then, pointing at a small scouting convoy that had peeled away from the main regiment, said, ‘I’ll disguise myself as one of his own and make my way to his side. Your ambush will provide the perfect cover for me to deliver the killing blow.’

I made my way down towards the ground and stole towards the scouts. Silently, I engaged my blade, slid it into the neck of the nearest soldier and was unbuttoning his jacket before he’d even hit the floor.

The regiment, some three hundred yards away now, began to move with a rumble like approaching thunder, the drums began again and the Indians used the sudden noise as cover to begin moving in the trees, adjusting their positions, readying the ambush.

I mounted the scout’s horse and spent a moment or so calming the animal, letting her get used to me, before taking her down a small incline towards the column. An officer, also on horseback, spotted me, and ordered me back into position, so I waved an apology then began to trot towards the head of the

column, past the baggage train and camp followers, past the marching soldiers, who threw me resentful looks and talked about me behind my back, and past the band, until I came almost level with the front of the column. Close now, but also more vulnerable. Close enough to hear Braddock talking to one of his men – one of his inner circle, his mercenaries.

'The French recognize they are weak in all things,' he was saying, 'and so they have allied themselves with the savages that inhabit these woods. Little more than animals, they sleep in trees, collect scalps and even eat their own dead. Mercy is too kind for them. Spare no one.'

I didn't know whether to chuckle or not. *'Eat their own dead.'* Nobody still believed that, surely?

The officer seemed to be thinking the same thing. 'But sir,' he protested, 'those are just stories. The natives I have known do nothing of the sort.'

In the saddle, Braddock rounded on him. 'Are you calling me a liar?' he roared.

'I misspoke, sir,' said the mercenary, trembling. 'I'm sorry. Truly, I am grateful to serve.'

'*Have* served, you mean,' snarled Braddock.

'Sir?' said the man, frightened.

'You are grateful to "*have* served",' repeated Braddock, drew his pistol and shot the man. The officer fell back from his horse, a red hole where his face had been, his body thumping to the tinder-dry forest floor. Meanwhile, the report of the gun had scared the birds from the trees and the column suddenly drew to a halt, the men pulling muskets from shoulders, drawing weapons, believing they were under attack.

For a few moments they remained at full alert, until the order came to stand down, and the word filtered back to them, a message delivered in hushed tones: the general had just shot an officer.

I was near enough to the front of the column to see George Washington's shocked reaction, and he alone had the courage to stand up to Braddock.

'General!'

Braddock rounded on him, and perhaps there was a moment in which Washington wondered if he was to receive the same treatment. Until Braddock thundered, 'I will not tolerate doubt among those I command. Nor sympathy for the enemy. I've no time for insubordination.'

Bravely George Washington countered, 'None denied he erred, sir, only …'

'He paid for his treachery as all traitors must. If we are to win this war against the French … Nay, *when* we win this war … It will be because men like you obeyed men like me – and did so without hesitation. We must have order in our

ranks, and a clear chain of command. Leaders and followers. Without such structure, there can be no victory. Am I understood?'

Washington nodded but quickly looked away, keeping his true feelings to himself, and then as the column moved off once more, moved away from the front on the pretext of attending to business elsewhere. I saw my chance and manoeuvred my way to behind Braddock, falling into position by his side, just slightly behind so that he wouldn't see me. Not yet.

I waited, biding my time, until suddenly there was a commotion from behind us, and the officer on the other side of Braddock peeled away to investigate, leaving just the two of us up front. Me and General Braddock.

I drew my pistol.

'Edward,' I said, and enjoyed the moment as he swivelled in his saddle and his eyes went from me, to the barrel of my pistol and then to me again. His mouth opened, about to do what, I wasn't sure – call for help probably – but I wasn't going to give him the chance. There was no escape for him now.

'Not so fun on the other end of the barrel, is it?' I said, and squeezed the trigger …

At exactly the same time as the regiment came under attack – damn, the trap had been sprung too soon – my horse gave a start and the shot went wide. Braddock's eyes flashed with hope and triumph as, suddenly, there were Frenchmen all around us and arrows began raining down from the trees above us. Braddock pulled on the reins of his horse with a yell and in the next moment was mounting the verge towards the trees, while I sat, my spent pistol in my hand, stunned by the abrupt turn of events.

The hesitation almost cost me my life. I found myself in the path of a Frenchman – blue jacket, red breeches – his sword swinging and heading straight for me. It was too late to engage my blade. Too late to draw my sword.

And then, just as rapidly, the Frenchman was flying from his saddle, as though jerked on a piece of rope, the side of his head exploding into a red spray. In the same moment I heard the gunshot and saw, on a horse behind him, my friend Charles Lee.

I nodded my thanks, but would have to give him more effusive gratitude later, as I saw Braddock disappearing into the trees, his feet kicking at the flank of his steed and casting a quick look behind him, seeing me about to give chase.

ii

Yelling encouragement at my horse, I followed Braddock into the forest, passing Indians and Frenchmen who were rushing down the hill towards the column.

Ahead of me, arrows rained down on Braddock, but none found its target. Now, too, the traps we had laid were being sprung. I saw the cart, primed with gunpowder, come trundling out of the trees and scatter a group of riflemen before exploding and sending riderless horses scattering away from the column, while, from above me, native snipers picked off frightened and disorientated soldiers.

Braddock stayed frustratingly ahead of me, until at last the terrain was too much for his horse, which reared up and sent him falling to the ground.

Howling in pain, Braddock rolled in the dirt and briefly fumbled for his pistol before deciding against it, pulled himself to his feet and began to run. For me, it was a simple matter to catch him up, and I spurred my horse on.

'I never took you for a coward, Edward,' I said as I reached him, and levelled my pistol.

He stopped in his tracks, span around and met my gaze. There – there was the arrogance. The scorn I knew so well.

'Come on then,' he sneered.

I trotted closer, my gun held, when, suddenly, there was the sound of a gunshot, my steed fell dead beneath me and I crashed to the forest floor.

'Such arrogance,' I heard Braddock call. 'I always knew it would be the end of you.'

Now at his side was George Washington, who raised his musket to aim at me. Instantly I had a fierce, bittersweet sense of consolation that at least it should be Washington, who clearly had a conscience and was nothing like the general, who was to end my life, and I closed my eyes, ready to accept death. I regretted that I had never seen my father's killers brought to justice, and that I had come tantalizingly close to discovering the secrets of Those Who Came Before but never entered the storehouse; and I wished that I'd been able to see the ideals of my Order spread throughout the world. In the end, I had not been able to change the world, but I had at least changed myself. I had not always been a good man, but I had tried to be a better one.

But the shot never came. And when I opened my eyes it was to see Washington knocked off his horse and Braddock swinging round to see his officer on the deck, tussling with a figure that I recognized immediately as Ziio, who had not only taken Washington by surprise but had disarmed him and had her knife to his throat. Braddock used the opportunity to flee, and I scrambled to my feet, racing across the clearing to where Ziio held Washington firm.

'Hurry,' she snapped at me. 'Before he gets away.'

I hesitated, not wanting to leave her alone with Washington, and more troops on the way no doubt, but she struck him with the hilt of her knife, sending his

eyes rolling, dazed, and I knew she could take care of herself. So I took off after Braddock once again, this time both of us on foot. He still had his pistol, and darted behind a huge tree trunk, spinning and raising his gun arm. I stopped and rolled into cover at the same time as he fired, heard the shot thump harmlessly into a tree to my left and without pausing leapt out of my cover to continue the chase. He had already taken to his feet, hoping to outrun me, but I was thirty years younger than him; I hadn't spent the last two decades getting fat in charge of an army, and I hardly broke a sweat as he began to slow. He glanced behind and his hat tumbled off as he mis-stepped and almost fell over the raised roots of a tree.

I slowed, let him regain his balance and continue running, then chased after him, barely jogging now. Behind us, the sounds of gunshots, of screams, of men and animals in pain, became fainter. The forest seemed to drown out the noise of battle, leaving just the sound of Braddock's ragged breathing and his footfalls on the soft forest floor. Again, he glanced behind and saw me – saw that I was barely even running now, and, finally, he dropped, exhausted, to his knees.

I flicked my finger, engaged the blade and came close to him. Shoulders heaving as he fought for breath, he said, 'Why, Haytham?'

'Your death opens a door; it's nothing personal,' I said.

I plunged the blade into him and watched as blood bubbled up around the steel and his body tautened and jerked with the agony of impalement. 'Well, maybe it's a little bit personal,' I said, as I lowered his dying body to the ground. 'You've been a pain in my ass, after all.'

'But we are brothers in arms,' he said. His eyelids fluttered as death beckoned to him.

'Once, perhaps. No longer. Do you think I've forgotten what you did? All those innocents slaughtered without a second thought. And for what? It does not engender peace to cut your way to resolution.'

His eyes focused, and he looked at me. 'Wrong,' he said, with a surprising and sudden inner strength. 'Were we to apply the sword more liberally and more often, the world would be possessed of far fewer troubles than it is today.'

I thought. 'In this instance, I concur,' I said.

I took his hand and pulled off the ring he wore that bore the Templar crest.

'Farewell, Edward,' I said, and stood waiting for him to die.

At that moment, however, I heard the sound of a group of soldiers approaching and saw I had no time to make my escape. Instead, I dropped to my belly and wormed my way beneath a fallen tree trunk, where I was suddenly at eye level with Braddock. His head turned to me, his eyes gleamed, and I knew

he’d give me away if he could. Slowly, his hand stretched out, his crooked finger trying to point in my direction as the men arrived.

Damn. I should have delivered the killing blow.

I saw the boots of the men who came into the clearing, wondered how the battle had gone, and saw George Washington shoulder his way through a small knot of troops to rush forward and kneel by the side of his dying general.

Braddock’s eyes fluttered still. His mouth worked as he tried to form words – the words to give me away. I steeled myself, counting the feet: six or seven men at least. Could I take them?

But, I realized, Braddock’s attempts to alert his men to my presence were being ignored. Instead, George Washington had put his head to his chest, listened then exclaimed, ‘He lives.’

Beneath the tree trunk I closed my eyes and cursed as the men picked Braddock up and took him away.

Later, I rejoined Ziio. ‘It’s done,’ I told her. She nodded.

‘Now I’ve upheld my part of the bargain, I expect that you will honour yours?’ I added.

She nodded again and bade me to follow her, and we began to ride.

10 July 1755

We rode overnight, and at last she stopped and indicated a dirt mound ahead of us. It was almost as if it had appeared from the forest. I wondered if I would even have seen it had I been here by myself. My heart quickened, and I swallowed. Did I imagine it, or was it as though the amulet suddenly woke up around my neck, became heavier, warmer?

I looked at her before walking to the opening then slid inside, where I found myself in a small room that had been lined with simple ceramic. There was a ring of pictographs around the room, leading to a depression on the wall. An amulet-sized depression.

I went to it and took the amulet from around my neck, pleased to see it glow slightly in my palm. Looking at Ziio, who returned my gaze, her own eyes wide with trepidation, I approached the indentation and, as my eyes adjusted to the dark, saw that two figures painted on the wall knelt before it, offering their hands to it as though to make an offering.

The amulet seemed to glow even more brightly now, as though the artefact itself were anticipating being reunited with the fabric of the chamber. How old was it? I wondered. How many millions of years before had the amulet been hewn from this very rock?

I had been holding my breath, I realized, and let it out in a whoosh now, as I reached up and pressed the amulet into the hollow.

Nothing happened.

I looked at Ziio. Then from her to the amulet, where its former glow was beginning to fade, almost as though mirroring my own deflating expectations. My lips moved, trying to find words. ‘No …’

I removed the amulet then tried it again, but still nothing.

‘You seem disappointed,’ she said at my side.

‘I thought I held the key,’ I said, and was dismayed to hear the tone in my own voice, the defeat and disappointment. ‘That it would open something here …’

She shrugged. ‘While this room is all there is.’

‘I expected …’

What had I expected?

‘… more.

‘These images, what do they mean?’ I asked, recovering myself.

Ziio went to the wall to gaze at them. One in particular seemed to catch her eye. It was a god or a goddess wearing an ancient, intricate headdress.

‘It tells the story of Iottsitíson,’ she said intently, ‘who came into our world and shaped it, that life might come. Hers was a hard journey, fraught with loss and great peril. But she believed in the potential of her children and what they might achieve. Though she is long gone from the physical world, her eyes still watch over us. Her ears still hear our words. Her hands still guide us. Her love still gives us strength.’

‘You’ve showed me a great kindness, Ziio. Thank you.’

When she looked back at me, her face was soft.

‘I am sorry you did not find what you seek.’

I took her hand. ‘I should go,’ I said, not wanting to go at all, and in the end she stopped me: she leaned forward and kissed me.

13 July 1755

‘Master Kenway, did you find it, then?’

They were the first words Charles Lee said to me when I entered our room at the Green Dragon tavern. My men were all assembled, and they looked at me with expectant eyes, then faces that dropped when I shook my head no.

‘It was not the right place,’ I confirmed. ‘I fear the temple was nothing more than a painted cave. Still, it contained precursor images and script, which means we are close. We must redouble our efforts, expand our Order and establish a permanent base here,’ I continued. ‘Though the site eludes us, I am confident we will find it.’

‘Truth!’ said John Pitcairn.

‘Hear, hear!’ chimed Benjamin Church.

‘Furthermore, I believe it is time we welcomed Charles into the fold. He has proven himself a loyal disciple – and served unerringly since the day he came to us. You should be able to share in our knowledge and reap all the benefits such a gift implies, Charles. Are any opposed?’

The men stayed silent, casting approving looks at Charles.

‘Very well.’ I went on: ‘Charles, come, stand.’ As he approached me I said, ‘Do you swear to uphold the principles of our Order and all of that for which we stand?’

‘I do.’

‘Never to share secrets nor divulge the true nature of our work?’

‘I do.’

‘And to do so from now until death – whatever the cost?’

‘I do.’

The men stood. ‘Then we welcome you into our fold, brother. Together we will usher in the dawn of a new world, one defined by purpose and order. Give me your hand.’

I took the ring I’d removed from Braddock’s finger and pushed it on to Charles’s.

I looked at him. ‘You are a Templar now.’

And at that he grinned. ‘May the father of understanding guide us,’ I said, and the men joined me. Our team was complete.

1 August 1755

Do I love her?

That question I find difficult to answer. All I knew was that I enjoyed being with her and came to treasure the time we spent together.

She was … different. There was something about her I had never experienced in another woman. That ‘spirit’ I spoke of before, it seemed to come through in her every word and gesture. I’d find myself looking at her, fascinated by the light that seemed permanently to burn in her eyes and wondering, always wondering, what was going on inside? What was she thinking?

I thought she loved me. I should say, I think she loves me, but she’s like me. There’s so much of herself she keeps hidden. And, like me, I think she knows that love cannot progress, that we cannot live out our lives together, either in this forest or in England, that there are too many barriers between us and our lives together: her tribe, for a start. She has no desire to leave her life behind. She sees her place as with her people, protecting her land – land they feel is under threat from people like me.

And I, too, have a responsibility to my people. The tenets of my Order, are they in line with the ideals of her tribe? I’m not sure that they are. Asked to choose between Ziio and the ideals I have been brought up to believe, which would I choose?

These are the thoughts that have plagued me over the last few weeks, even as I have luxuriated in these sweet, stolen hours with Ziio. I have wondered what to do.

4 August 1755

My decision has been made for me because, this morning, we had a visitor.

We were at camp, about five miles from Lexington, where we hadn't seen anyone – *not another human being* – for several weeks. I heard him, of course, before I saw him. Or, rather, I should say that I heard the disturbance he caused: a fluttering in the distance as the birds left the trees. No Mohawk would have caused them to behave in such a way, I knew, which meant it was another: a colonial, a patriot, a British soldier; perhaps even a French scout, a long way out of his way.

Ziio had left the camp almost an hour ago to hunt. Still, I knew her well enough to know that she would have seen the disturbed birds; she, too, would be reaching for her musket.

I shimmied quickly up the lookout tree and scanned the area around us. There, in the distance – there he was, a lone rider trotting slowly through the forest. His musket was slung across his shoulder. He wore a tricorne hat and a dark buttoned-up coat; no military uniform. Reining his horse, he stopped and I saw him reach into a knapsack, retrieve a spyglass and put it to his eye. I watched as he angled the spyglass upwards, above the canopy of trees.

Why upwards? Clever boy. He was looking for the tell-tale wisps of smoke, grey against the bright, blue early morning sky. I glanced down at our campfire, saw the smoke that curled its way up to the heavens then looked back at the rider, watching as he moved his spyglass around the skyline, almost as if …

Yes. Almost as if he had divided the search area into a grid and was moving methodically across it square by square, exactly the same way that …

I did. Or one of my pupils did.

I allowed myself to relax slightly. It was one of my men – probably Charles, judging by his build and clothes. I watched as he saw the wisps of smoke from the fire, replaced his spyglass in his knapsack and began trotting towards the camp. Now he was near, I saw that it was Charles, and I let myself down the tree and into camp, wondering about Ziio.

Back at ground level I looked around, and saw the camp through Charles's eyes: the campfire, the two tin plates, a canvas strung between trees, under

which were the skins that Ziio and I covered ourselves with for warmth at night. I flipped the canvas down so that the skins were obscured then knelt by the fire and collected the tin plates. A few moments later, his horse came into the clearing.

'Hello, Charles,' I said, without looking at him.

'You knew it was me?'

'I saw you are using your training: I was very impressed.'

'I was trained by the best,' he said. And I heard the smile in his voice, looked up at last to see him gazing down at me.

'We've missed you, Master Kenway,' he said.

I nodded. 'And I you.'

His eyebrows lifted. 'Really? You know where we are.'

I pushed a stick into the fire and watched the tip of it glow. 'I wanted to know that you are able to operate in my absence.'

He pursed his lips and nodded. 'I think you know we can. What's the real reason for your absence, Haytham?'

I looked up sharply from the fire. 'What *might* it be, Charles?'

'Perhaps you are enjoying life here with your Indian woman, suspended between two worlds, responsible to neither. It must be nice to take such a holiday …'

'Careful, Charles,' I warned. Suddenly aware that he looked down on me, I stood to meet his eye, to be on more equal terms. 'Perhaps instead of concerning yourself with my activities, you should concentrate on your own. Tell me, how are matters in Boston?'

'We have been taking care of those matters you would have us attend to. Concerning the land.'

I nodded, thinking of Ziio, wondering if there was another way.

'Anything else?' I asked.

'We continue to look for signs of the precursor site …' he said, and raised his chin.

'I see …'

'William plans to lead an expedition to the chamber.'

I started. 'Nobody has asked me about this.'

'You haven't been there to ask,' said Charles. 'William thought … Well, if we want to find the site, then that's the best place to start.'

'We will enrage the natives if we begin setting up camp in their lands.'

Charles gave me a look as though I had taken leave of my senses. Of course. What did we, the Templars, care about upsetting a few natives?

‘I’ve been thinking about the site,’ I said quickly. ‘Somehow it seems less important now …’ I looked off into the distance.

‘Something else you plan to neglect?’ he asked impertinently.

‘I’m warning you …’ I said, and flexed my fingers.

He cast a look around the camp. ‘Where is she anyway? Your Indian … lover?’

‘Nowhere you need concern yourself with, Charles, and I would thank you to remove that tone from your voice when you speak of her in the future, else I might find myself compelled to remove it forcibly.’

His eyes were cold when he looked at me. ‘A letter has arrived,’ he said, reached into his knapsack and dropped it so that it landed at my feet. I glanced down to see my name on the front of the envelope, and recognized the handwriting immediately. The letter came from Holden, and my heart quickened just to see it: a link with my old life, my other life in England and my preoccupations there: finding my father’s killers.

I did or said nothing to betray my emotions on seeing the letter, adding, ‘Is there more?’

‘Yes,’ said Charles, ‘some good news. General Braddock has succumbed to his injuries. He is dead at last.’

‘When was this?’

‘He died soon after he was injured but the news has only just reached us.’

I nodded. ‘Then that bit of business is at an end,’ I said.

‘Excellent,’ said Charles. ‘Then I shall return, shall I? Tell the men that you are enjoying life here in the wilds? We can only hope that you grace us with your presence some time in the future.’

I thought of the letter from Holden. ‘Perhaps sooner than you think, Charles. I have a feeling I may soon be called away on a business. You have proved yourself more than capable of dealing with matters.’ I gave him a thin, mirthless smile. ‘Perhaps you will continue to do so.’

Charles pulled on the reins of his horse. ‘As you wish, Master Kenway. I will tell the men to expect you. In the meantime, please give your lady friend our regards.’

And, with that, he was gone. I crouched a little longer by the fire, the forest silent around me, then said, ‘You can come out now, Ziio, he’s gone,’ and she dropped down from a tree, came striding into the clearing, her face like thunder.

I stood to meet her. The necklace she always wore glinted in the morning sun and her eyes flashed angrily.

‘He was alive,’ she said. ‘You lied to me.’

I swallowed. ‘But, Ziio, I …’

‘You told me he was dead,’ she said, her voice rising. ‘You told me he was dead so that I would show you the temple.’

‘Yes,’ I admitted. ‘I did do that, and for that I’m sorry.’

‘And what’s this about land?’ she interrupted. ‘What was that man saying about this land? Are you trying to take it, is that it?’

‘No,’ I said.

‘Liar!’ she cried

‘Wait. I can explain …’

But she had already drawn her sword. ‘I should kill you for what you’ve done.’

‘You’ve every right to your anger, to curse my name and wish me gone. But the truth is not what you believe it to be,’ I started.

‘Leave!’ she said. ‘Leave this place and never return. For, if you do, I will tear out your heart with my own two hands and feed it to the wolves.’

‘Only listen to me, I –’

‘Swear it,’ she shouted.

I hung my head. ‘As you wish.’

‘Then we are finished,’ she said, then turned and left me to pack my things and return to Boston.

17 September 1757
(Two Years Later)

i

As the sun set, painting Damascus a golden-brown colour, I walked with my friend and companion Jim Holden in the shadow of the walls of Qasr al-Azm.

And I thought about the four words that had brought me here.

‘I have found her.’

They were the only words on the letter, but they told me everything I needed to know and were enough to transport me from America to England, where, before anything else could happen, I’d met with Reginald at White’s to fill him in on events in Boston. He knew much of what had happened, of course, from letters, but, even so, I’d expected him to show an interest in the work of the Order, particularly where it concerned his old friend Edward Braddock.

I was wrong. All he cared about was the precursor site, and when I told him I had new details regarding the location of the temple and that they were to be found within the Ottoman empire, he sighed and gave a beatific smile, like a laudanum addict savouring his syrup.

Moments later, he was asking, ‘Where is the book?’ with a fidgety sound in his voice.

‘William Johnson has made a copy,’ I said, and reached to my bag in order to return the original, which I slid across the table towards him. It was wrapped in cloth, tied with twine, and he looked at me gratefully before reaching to untie the bow and flip open the covering to gaze upon his beloved tome: the aged brown leather cover, the stamp of the Assassin on its front.

‘Are they conducting a thorough search of the chamber?’ he asked as he wrapped up the book, re-tied the bow then slipped it away covetously. ‘I should very much like to see this chamber for myself.’

‘Indeed,’ I lied. ‘The men are to establish a camp there but face daily attacks from the natives. It would be very hazardous for you, Reginald. You are Grand Master of the British Rite. Your time is best spent here.’

‘I see,’ he nodded. ‘I see.’

I watched him carefully. For him to have insisted on visiting the chamber would have been an admission of neglect of his Grand Master duties, and, obsessed as he was, Reginald wasn't ready to do that yet.

'And the amulet?' he said.

'I have it,' I replied.

We talked some more, but there was little warmth and, when we parted, I left wondering what lay in his heart and what lay in mine. I had begun to think of myself not so much as a Templar but a man with Assassin roots and Templar beliefs, whose heart had briefly been lost to a Mohawk woman. A man with a unique perspective, in other words.

Accordingly, I had been less preoccupied with finding the temple and using its contents to establish Templar supremacy, and more with bringing together the two disciplines, Assassin and Templar. I'd reflected on how my father's teachings had often dovetailed with those of Reginald, and I'd begun seeing the similarities between the two factions, rather than the differences.

But first – first there was the unfinished business that had occupied my mind for so many years. Was it finding my father's killers or finding Jenny that was more important now? Either way, I wanted freedom from this long, dark shadow that had loomed over me for so long.

ii

And so it was that with those words – 'I have found her' – Holden began another odyssey, one that took us into the heart of the Ottoman empire, where, for the past two years, he and I had tracked Jenny.

She was alive – that was his discovery. Alive and in the hands of slavers. As the world fought the Seven Years War, we came close to discovering her exact location, but the slavers had moved on before we were able to mobilize. After that we spent several months trying to find her then discovered she'd been passed to the Ottoman court as a concubine at Topkapı Palace and made our way there. Again we were too late; she'd been moved to Damascus, and to the great palace built by the Ottoman governor in charge, As'ad Pasha al-Azm.

And so we came to Damascus, where I wore the outfit of a wealthy tradesman, a kaftan and a turban, as well as voluminous salwar trousers, feeling not a little self-conscious, truth be told, while beside me Holden wore simple robes. As we made our way through the gates of the city and into its narrow, winding streets towards the palace, we noticed more guards than usual, and Holden, having done his homework, filled me in as we ambled slowly in the dust and heat.

‘The governor’s nervous, sir,’ he explained. ‘Reckons the Grand Vizier Raghib Pasha in Istanbul has it in for him.’

‘I see. And is he right? Does the grand vizier have it in for him?’

‘The grand vizier called him the “peasant son of a peasant”.’

‘Sounds like he has got it in for him then.’

Holden chuckled. ‘That’s right. So the governor fears being deposed and, as a result, he’s increased security all over the city, and especially at the palace. You see all these people?’ He indicated a clamour of citizens not far away, hurrying across our path.

‘Yes.’

‘Off to an execution. A palace spy, apparently. As’ad Pasha al-Azm is seeing them everywhere.’

In a small square thronged with people we watched a man beheaded. He died with dignity, and the crowd roared its approval as his severed head rolled to the blood-blackened boards of the scaffold. Above the square the governor’s platform was empty. He was staying at the palace, according to gossip, and didn’t dare show his face.

When it was over, Holden and I turned and strolled away, heading towards the palace, where we paced the walls, noting the four sentries at the main gate and the others positioned by arched side gates.

‘What’s it like inside?’ I asked.

‘Two main wings: the *haramlik* and the *salamlik*. In the *salamlik* is where you got your halls, reception areas and entertainment courtyards, but the *haramlik*, that’s where we’ll find Miss Jenny.’

‘*If* she’s in there.’

‘Oh, she’s in there, sir.’

‘You’re sure?’

‘As God is my witness.’

‘Why was she moved from Topkapı Palace? Do you know?’

He looked at me and pulled an awkward face. ‘Well, her age, sir. She would have been highly prized at first, of course, when she was younger; it’s against Islamic law to imprison other Muslims, see, so the majority of the concubines are Christians – caught in the Balkans, most of them – and if Miss Jenny was as comely as you say, well, then I’m sure she’d have been quite a catch. Trouble is, it’s not like there’s a shortage of them, and Miss Kenway – well, she’s in her mid-forties, sir. Been a long time since she had concubine duties; she’s little more than a servant. I suppose you might say that she’s been demoted, sir.’

I thought about that, finding it difficult to believe that the Jenny I’d once known – beautiful, imperious Jenny – had such lowly standing. Somehow I’d

imagined her perfectly preserved and cutting a commanding figure at the Ottoman court, perhaps having already risen to the position of Queen Mother. Instead, here she was in Damascus, at the home of an unpopular governor who was himself about to be deposed. What did they do to the servants and concubines of a deposed governor? I wondered. Possibly, they met the same fate as the poor soul we'd seen beheaded earlier.

'What about the guards inside?' I asked. 'I didn't think they allowed men in the harem.'

He shook his head. 'All the guards in the harem are eunuchs. The operation to make them eunuchs – bloody hell, sir, you don't want to know about it.'

'But you're going to tell me anyway?'

'Well, yeah, don't see why I should have to carry that burden all by myself. They hack the poor bleeder's genitals off then bury the bloke in sand up to his neck for ten days. Only 10 per cent of the poor buggers even survive the process, and those guys are the toughest of the tough.'

'Right,' I said.

'One other thing: the *haramlik*, where the concubines live, the baths are in there.'

'The baths are in there?'

'Yes.'

'And why are you telling me that?'

He stopped. He looked from left to right, squinting in the sun. Satisfied the coast was clear, he stooped, grasped an iron ring I hadn't even seen, so well was it covered by the sand below our feet, and yanked it upwards, opening a trapdoor and revealing stone steps descending into the dark.

'Quick, sir' – he grinned – 'before a sentry comes round.'

iii

Once at the bottom of the steps, we took stock of our surroundings. It was dark, almost too dark to see, but from the left of us came the trickle of a stream, while ahead stretched what looked like a walkway used either for deliveries or maintenance of the running-water channels; probably a mixture of both.

We said nothing. Holden delved into a leather knapsack to extract a taper and a tinderbox. He lit the taper then placed it into his mouth and pulled a short torch from the knapsack, which he lit and held above his head, casting a soft orange glow all around us. Sure enough, to our left was an aqueduct, while the uneven path dissolved into blackness.

‘It’ll take us right under the palace, and underneath the baths,’ said Holden in a whisper. ‘If I’m right, we’ll come up into a room with a freshwater pool, right beneath the main baths.’

Impressed, I said, ‘You kept this quiet.’

‘I like to have the odd trick up my sleeve, sir.’ He beamed. ‘I’ll lead the way, shall I?’

And with that he moved off, lapsing into silence as we made our way along the pathway. When the torches had burned out, we dropped them and lit two new ones from the taper in Holden’s mouth then walked some more. At last the area ahead of us widened out into a shimmering chamber, where the first thing we saw was a pool, its walls lined with marble tiles, the water so clear that it seemed to glow in the meagre light offered by an open trapdoor at the top of some nearby steps.

The second thing we saw was a eunuch, who knelt with his back to us, filling an earthenware jug from the pool. He wore a tall white *kalpak* on his head, and flowing robes. Holden looked at me with his finger to his lips then began to creep forward, a dagger already in his fist, but I stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. We wanted the eunuch’s clothes, and that meant avoiding bloodstains. This was a man who served the concubines at an Ottoman palace, not a common redcoat in Boston, and I had the feeling that blood on his clothing wouldn’t be so easily explained away. So I inched past Holden on the walkway, unconsciously flexing my fingers and in my mind locating the carotid artery on the eunuch, coming closer as he finished filling the jug and straightened to leave.

But then my sandal scuffed the pathway. The noise was tiny but nevertheless sounded like a volcano erupting in the enclosed space, and the eunuch flinched.

I froze and inwardly cursed my sandals as his head tilted to look up to the trapdoor, trying to locate the source of the noise. When he saw nothing, he seemed to go very still, as though he’d realized that, if the sound hadn’t come from above, then it must have come from …

He span round.

There’d been something about his clothes, his bearing, the way he knelt to fill his jug: none of it had prepared me for the speed of his reaction. Nor the skill. For as he swivelled he crouched, and from the corner of my eye I saw the jug in his fist whip up towards me, so fast it would have knocked me down if I hadn’t shown a turn of equal speed and ducked.

I had evaded him, but only just. As I scuttled back to avoid another blow from the jug, his eyes flitted over my shoulder and saw Holden. Next, he turned to cast a quick look at the stone steps, his only exit. He was assessing his options: run or stand and fight. And he settled on stand and fight.

Which made him, just as Holden had said, one – *very* – tough eunuch.

He took a few steps back, reached beneath his robes and produced a sword, simultaneously punching the earthenware jug against the wall to give himself a second weapon. Then, sword in one hand, jagged jug in another, he advanced.

The walkway was too narrow. Only one of us could face him at any one time, and I was the nearer. The time to worry about blood on robes was over, and I released my blade, stepping back a little myself and taking a stance ready to meet him. Implacably, he advanced, all the time holding my gaze. There was something fearsome about him, something I couldn't put my finger on at first, but then I realized what it was: he did something no opponent had ever done: as my old nursemaid Edith would have said, he gave me the creeps. It was knowing what he'd been through, the procedure to make him a eunuch. Living through that, nothing held any fear for him, least of all me, a clumsy oaf who couldn't even sneak up on him successfully.

He knew it, too. He knew he gave me the creeps and he used it. It was all there in his eyes, which didn't register an emotion as the sword in his right hand slashed towards me. I was forced to block with the blade and only just twisted to avoid the follow-up which came from his left as he tried and almost succeeded in shoving the broken jug into my face.

He gave me no time to rest, perhaps realizing that the only way to beat both me and Holden was to keep driving us back along the narrow walkway. Again the sword flashed, this time underarm, and again I defended with the blade, grimacing with pain as I used my forearm to stop a secondary strike from the jug then replying with an offensive move of my own, jogging slightly to my right and driving my blade towards his sternum. He used the jug as a shield, and my blade smashed into it, sprinkling earthenware to the stone beneath us, splish-splashing into the pool. My blade was going to need sharpening after this.

If I got out of this.

And damn the man. He was the first eunuch we'd met and already we were struggling. I motioned Holden to stand back and keep from under my feet as I retreated, trying to give myself some space and reorganize myself internally at the same time.

The eunuch was beating me – not just with skill, but because I feared him. And fear is what a warrior fears most.

I crouched low, brought the blades to bear and met his eye. For a moment we stood motionless, engaged in a silent but ferocious battle of will. A battle I won. Somehow his hold over me broke, and all it took was a flicker of his eyes to tell me that he knew it, too; that the psychological victory was no longer his.

I stepped forward, blade flashing, and now it was his turn to edge back, defending well and steadily but no longer with the upper hand. At one point, he even grunted, his lips pulled back from his teeth, and I saw the beginnings of a sweat glow dully on his forehead. My blade moved quickly. And now that I had him retreating, I began to think afresh about keeping his robes free of blood. The battle had turned; it was mine now, and he was swinging wildly with his sword, his attacks becoming more disorganized until I saw my chance, dropped almost to my knees and thrust upwards with the blade, punching up into his jaw.

His body spasmed and his arms outstretched as though crucified. His sword dropped, and when his lips stretched wide in a silent scream I saw the silver of my impaling blade inside his mouth. Then his body dropped.

I'd driven him all the way back to the foot of the steps and the hatch was open. Any moment now, another eunuch would be along to wonder where the jug of water had got to. Sure enough, I heard footsteps from above us and a shadow passed across the hatch. I ducked back, grabbed at the ankles of the dead man and dragged him with me, snatching off his hat and jamming it on my own head.

The next thing I saw was the bare feet of a eunuch as he descended the steps and angled his head to peer down into the pool chamber. The sight of me in the white hat was enough to disorientate him for one precious second, and I lunged, grabbed his robes in my fists and yanked him down the steps towards me, slamming my forehead into the bridge of his nose before he could scream. The bones crunched and broke, and I held his head up to stop blood leaking to his robes as his eyes rolled up and he slouched, dazed, against the wall. In moments he'd recover his senses and shout for help, and I couldn't allow that. So I rammed the flat of my hand hard into his mashed nose, driving splinters of broken bone into his brain and killing him instantly.

Seconds later I'd scampered up the steps and, very carefully, very gently, closed the hatch, giving us at least a few moments of concealment before reinforcements arrived. Somewhere, presumably, a concubine was expecting a jug of water to be delivered.

We said nothing, just slipped into the eunuchs' robes and pulled on our *kalpaks*. How glad I was to get rid of those blasted sandals. And then we looked at one another. Holden had spots of blood on the front of his gown, from where I had smashed the nose of the robe's previous wearer. I scratched at it with a nail but, instead of it flaking off as I'd hoped, it was still wet and smeared a little. In the end, using a complicated series of pained facial expressions and furious nods, we decided by mutual consent to leave the bloodstain and risk it. Next, I carefully opened the hatch and let myself out into the room above, which was

empty. It was a dark, cool room, tiled in marble that seemed luminescent, thanks to a pool that covered most of the floor space, its surface smooth, silent yet somehow alive.

With the coast clear I turned and motioned to Holden, who followed me through the hatch into the room. We stood there for a moment or so taking in our surroundings, giving each other cautiously triumphant looks before moving to the door, opening it and letting ourselves out into the courtyard beyond.

iv

Not knowing what lay on the other side, I'd been flexing my fingers, ready to release my blade at a moment's notice, while Holden had no doubt been set to reach for his sword, both of us poised to fight should we be greeted by a squad of snarling eunuchs, a huddle of howling concubines.

Instead what we saw was a scene straight out of heaven, an afterlife filled with peace and serenity and beautiful women. It was a large courtyard paved in black and white stone, with a trickling fountain at its centre and a surround of ornate columned porticos shaded by overhanging vines and trees. A restful place, devoted to beauty, serenity, tranquillity and thought. The trickle and burble of the fountain was the only sound, despite all the people there. Concubines in flowing white silk either sat on stone benches, meditative or doing needlework, or crossed the courtyard, bare feet padding silently on the stone, impossibly proud and erect, nodding courteously to one another as they passed; while among them moved servant girls, dressed similarly but easy to spot because they were younger or older, or not as beautiful as the women they served.

There was an equal number of men, most of whom stood around the edges of the courtyard, watchful and waiting to be called forward to serve: the eunuchs. None looked our way, I was relieved to see; the rules around eye contact were as elaborate as the mosaics. And as two unfamiliar-looking eunuchs trying to negotiate our way around a strange place, that suited us down to the ground.

We stayed by the door of the baths, which was partly obscured by the columns and vines of the portico, and I unconsciously adopted the same pose as the other guards – back straight, my hands held together in front of me – as my gaze swept the courtyard in search of Jenny.

And there she was. I didn't recognize her at first; my eyes almost went past her. But when I looked again, to where a concubine sat relaxing with her back to the fountain, having her feet massaged by her serving woman, I realized that the serving woman was my sister.

Time had taken its toll on those looks, and though there was still a glimmer of the beauty she'd once been, her dark hair was flecked with grey, her face was drawn and lined and her skin had sagged a little, revealing dark hollows beneath her eyes: tired eyes. What an irony it was that I should recognize the look on the face of the girl she tended to: the vain and disdainful way she gazed down her nose. I'd grown up seeing it on my sister's face. Not that I took any pleasure in the irony, but I couldn't ignore it.

As I stared, Jenny looked across the courtyard at me. For a second her eyebrows furrowed in confusion, and I wondered if, after all these years, she'd recognize me. But no. I was too far away. I was disguised as a eunuch. The jug – it had been meant for her. And maybe she was wondering why two eunuchs had walked into the baths and two different ones had walked out.

Still wearing a confused expression, she stood, genuflected to the concubine she served then began to move over, weaving through silken-clothed concubines as she crossed the courtyard towards us. I slipped behind Holden just as she ducked her head to avoid the vines dangling from the portico and was standing a foot or so away from us.

She said nothing, of course – talking was forbidden – but then again she didn't need to. Lurking behind Holden's right shoulder, I risked a look at her face and watched as her eyes slid from him to the bath-chamber door, her meaning clear to see: *where is my water?* On her face, as she exerted what little authority she had, I could see a reminder of the girl Jenny had been, a ghost of the haughtiness that had once been so familiar to me.

Meanwhile, Holden, reacting to the furious gaze he received from Jenny, bowed his head and was about to turn towards the bath chamber. I prayed he'd had the same flash of inspiration as me, and that he had realized, if he could somehow lure Jenny inside, then we could make our escape with hardly a ruffle caused. Sure enough, he was spreading his hands to indicate there'd been a problem, then gesturing at the door to the bath chamber, as though to say he needed assistance. But Jenny, far from being prepared to offer it, had instead noticed something about Holden's attire and, rather than accompanying him into the bath house, stopped him with an upraised finger which she first crooked at him and then turned to indicate something on his chest. A bloodstain.

Her eyes widened and again I looked, this time to see her eyes move from the bloodstain on Holden's robes to his face, and what she saw there was the face of an imposter.

Her mouth dropped open. She took a step back then another until she bumped into one of the columns and the impact jogged her out of her sudden, shocked daze and, as she opened her mouth, about to break the sacred rule and call for

help, I slipped from behind Holden's shoulder, hissing, 'Jenny, it's me. It's Haytham.'

As I said it I glanced nervously out into the courtyard, where everyone continued as before, oblivious to what was happening beneath the portico, and then I looked back to see Jenny staring at me, her eyes growing wider, already misting up with tears as the years fell away and she recognized me.

'Haytham,' she whispered, 'you've come for me.'

'Yes, Jenny yes,' I replied in a hush, feeling a strange mix of emotions, at least one of which was guilt.

'I knew you'd come,' she said. 'I knew you'd come.'

Her voice was rising, and I began to worry, casting another panicky look out into the courtyard. Then she reached forward and grasped my two hands in both of hers and brushed past Holden to look imploringly into my eyes. 'Tell me he's dead. Tell me you killed him.'

Torn between wanting her to keep quiet and wanting to know what she meant, I hissed, 'Who? Tell you who's dead?'

'Birch,' she spat, and this time her voice was too loud. Past her shoulder I saw a concubine. Gliding towards us beneath the portico, perhaps on her way to the bath chamber, she'd seemed lost in thought, but at the sound of a voice she looked up, and her expression of calm serenity was replaced by one of panic – and she leaned out into the courtyard and called the one word we had all been fearing.

'Guards!'

v

The first guard to come rushing over didn't realize I was armed, and I'd engaged the blade and plunged it into his abdomen before he even knew what was happening. His eyes went wide and he grunted flecks of blood into my face. With a yell of effort, I wrenched my arm round and pulled him with me, ramming his still-writhing corpse into a second man who came rushing towards us, and sent them both tumbling back to the black and white tiles of the courtyard. More arrived, and the fight was on. From the corner of my eye I saw the flash of a blade and turned just in time to avoid it being embedded into my neck. Twisting, I grabbed the assailant's sword arm, broke it and slid my blade up into his skull. I went into a crouch, pivoted and kicked to take away the legs of a fourth man then scrambled to my feet, stamped on his face and heard his skull crunch.

Not far away, Holden had felled three of the eunuchs, but by now the guards had the measure of us and were approaching with more caution, assembling for combat even as we took cover behind the columns and threw worried glances at each other, each wondering if we could make it back to the trapdoor before we were overrun.

Clever boys. Two of them moved forward together. I stood side by side with Holden and we fought back, even as another pair of guards moved in from our right. For a moment it was touch and go, as we stood back to back and battled the guards out of the portico until they withdrew, ready to launch their next attack, inching closer all the time, crowding in.

Behind us, Jenny stood by the door to the bath chamber. 'Haytham!' she called, a note of panic in her voice. 'We've got to go.'

What would they do to her if she was captured now? I wondered What would her punishment be? I dreaded to think.

'You two go, sir,' urged Holden over his shoulder.

'No way,' I called back.

Again came an attack and again we fought. A eunuch fell dying with a groan. Even in death, even with sword steel in their gut, these men didn't scream. Over the shoulders of the ones in front of us I saw more of them pouring into the courtyard. They were like cockroaches. For every one we killed there were two to take his place.

'Go, sir!' insisted Holden. 'I'll keep them back then follow you.'

'Don't be a fool, Holden,' I barked, unable to keep the scoffing sound out of my voice. 'There's no holding them back. They'll cut you down.'

'I've been in tighter spots than this one, sir,' grunted Holden, his sword arm working as he exchanged blows. But I could hear the false bravado in his voice.

'Then you won't mind if I stay,' I said, at the same time fending off one of the eunuch's sword strikes and parrying, not with my blade but with a punch to the face that sent him pinwheeling back.

'Go!' he shrieked.

'We die. We both die,' I replied.

But Holden had decided that the time for courtesy was over. 'Listen, mate, either you two make it out of here or none of us do. What's it going to be?'

At the same time, Jenny was pulling on my hand, the door to the bath chamber open, and more men arriving from our left. But still I hesitated. Until, at last, with a shake of his head, Holden whipped round, yelled, 'You'll have to excuse me sir,' and before I could react had shoved me backwards through the door and slammed it shut.

There was a moment of shocked silence in the bath chamber as I sprawled on the floor and tried to absorb what had happened. From the other side of the door I heard the sounds of battle – a strange, quiet, muted battle it was, too – and a thudding at the door. Next there was a shout – a shout that belonged to Holden, and I pulled myself to my feet, about to haul the door open and rush back out, when Jenny grasped hold of my arm.

'You can't help him now, Haytham,' she said softly, just as there came another yell from the courtyard, Holden shouting, 'You bastards, you bloody prickless bastards.'

I cast one last look back at the door then pulled the bar across to lock it as Jenny dragged me over to the hatch in the floor.

'Is that the best you can do, you bastards?' I heard from above us as we took the steps, Holden's voice growing fainter now. 'Come on, you dickless wonders, let's see how you fare against one of His Majesty's men …'

The last thing we heard as we ran back along the walkway was the sound of a scream.

21 September 1757

i

I had hoped never to take pleasure in killing, but, for the Coptic priest who stood guard close to the Abou Gerbe monastery on Mount Ghebel Eter, I made an exception. I have to admit I enjoyed killing him.

He crumpled to the dirt at the base of a fence that surrounded a small enclosure, his chest heaving and his last breaths coming in jagged bursts as he died. Overhead, a buzzard cawed, and I glanced to where the arches and spires of the sandstone monastery loomed on the horizon. Saw the warm glow of life at the window.

The dying guard gurgled at my feet, and for a second it occurred to me to finish him quickly – but then again, why show him mercy? However slowly he died and however much pain he felt while it happened, it was nothing – *nothing* – compared to the agony inflicted on those poor souls who had suffered within the enclosure.

And one in particular, who was suffering in there now.

I had learnt in the market in Damascus that Holden had not been killed, as I had thought, but captured and transported to Egypt and to the Coptic monastery at Abou Gerbe, where they turned men into eunuchs. So that is where I came, praying I would not be too late but, in my heart of hearts, knowing I would be. And I was.

Looking at the fence, I could tell it would be sunk deep into the ground to prevent predatory night-time animals digging beneath it. Within the enclosure was the place where they buried the eunuchs up to their necks in sand and kept them there for ten days. They didn't want hyenas gnawing away at the faces of the buried men during that time. Absolutely not. No, if those men died, they were to die of slow exposure to the sun or of the wounds inflicted upon them during the castration procedure.

With the guard dead behind me, I crept into the enclosure. It was dark, just the light of the moon to guide me, but I could see that the sand around was bloodstained. How many men, I wondered, had suffered here, mutilated then

buried up to their necks? From not far away came a low groan, and I squinted, seeing an irregular shape on the ground at the centre of the enclosure, and I knew straight away that it belonged to Private James Holden.

'Holden,' I whispered, and a second later was crouching to where his head protruded from the sand, gasping at what I saw. The night was cool, but the days were hot, tortuously so, and the sun had burned him so badly it was as though the very flesh had been seared away from his face. His lips and eyelids were crusted and bleeding, his skin red and peeling. I had a leather flask of water at the ready, uncorked it and held it to his lips.

'Holden?' I repeated.

He stirred. His eyes flickered open and focused on me, milky and full of pain but with recognition, and very slowly the ghost of a smile appeared on his cracked and petrified lips.

Then, just as quickly, it was gone and he was convulsing. Whether he was trying to wrench himself out of the sand or struck by a fit I wasn't sure, but his head thrashed from side to side, his mouth yawned open, and I leaned forward, taking his face in both of my hands to stop him hurting himself.

'Holden,' I said, keeping my voice down. 'Holden, stop. Please …'

'Get me out of here, sir,' he rasped, and his eyes gleamed wet in the moonlight. 'Get me out.'

'Holden …'

'Get me out of here,' he pleaded. 'Get me out of here, sir, please, sir, now, sir …'

Again his head began jerking painfully left to right. Again I reached out to steady him, needing to stop him before he became hysterical. How long did I have before they posted a new guard? I offered the flask to his lips and let him sip more water then pulled a shovel I had brought from my back and began scooping blood-soaked sand from around his head, talking to him at the same time as I exposed his bare shoulders and chest.

'I'm so sorry, Holden, I'm so sorry. I should never have left you.'

'I told you to, sir,' he managed. 'I gave you a push, remember …'

As I dug down, the sand was even more black with blood. 'Oh God, what have they done to you?'

But I already knew and, anyway, I had my proof moments later, when I reached his waist to find it swathed in bandages – also thick and black and crusted with blood.

'Be careful down there, sir, please,' he said, very, very quietly, and I could see that he was wincing, biting back the pain. Which in the end was too much for him, and he lost consciousness, a blessing which allowed me to uncover him and

take him from that accursed place and to our two horses, which were tethered to trees at the bottom of the hill.

ii

I made Holden comfortable then stood and looked up the hill towards the monastery. I checked the mechanism of my blade, strapped a sword to my waist, primed two pistols and pushed them into my belt, then primed two muskets. Next I lit a taper and torch and, taking the muskets, made my way back up the hill, where I lit a second and third torch. I chased the horses out then tossed the first torch into the stables, the hay going up with a satisfying *whoomph*; the second torch I threw into the vestibule of the chapel, and when both that and the stables were nicely ablaze I jogged across to the dormitory, lighting two more torches on the way, smashing rear windows and tossing the torches inside. And then I returned to the front door, where I'd leant the muskets against a tree. And I waited.

Not for long. In moments, the first priest appeared. I shot him down, tossed the first musket aside, picked up the second and used it on the second priest. More began to pour out, and I emptied the pistols then dashed up to the doorway and began attacking with my blade and sword. Bodies fell around me – ten, eleven or more – as the building burned, until I was slick with priest blood, my hands covered in it, trails of it running from my face. I let the wounded scream in agony as the remaining priests inside cowered – not wanting to burn, too terrified to run out and face death. Some chanced it, of course, and came charging out wielding swords, only to be cut down. Others I heard burning. Maybe some escaped, but I wasn't in the mood to be thorough. I made sure that most of them died; I heard the screams and smelled the burning flesh of those who hid inside, and then I stepped over the bodies of the dead and dying and left, as the monastery burned behind me.

25 September 1757

We were in a cottage, at a table, with the remains of a meal and single candle between us. Not far away, Holden slept, feverish, and every now and then I'd get up to change the rag on his forehead for a cooler one. We'd need to let the fever run its course and only then, when he was better, continue our journey.

'Father was an Assassin,' Jenny said as I sat down. It was the first time we'd spoken about such matters since the rescue. We'd been too preoccupied with looking after Holden, escaping Egypt and finding shelter each night.

'I know,' I said.

'You know?'

'Yes. I found out. I've realized that's what you meant all those years ago. Do you remember? You used to call me "Squirt" …'

She pursed her lips and shifted uncomfortably.

'… and what you said about me being the male heir. How I'd find out sooner or later what lay in store for me?'

'I remember …'

'Well, it turned out to be later rather than sooner that I discovered what lay in store for me.'

'But if you knew, then why does Birch live?'

'Why would he be dead?'

'He's a Templar.'

'As am I.'

She reared back, fury clouding her face. '*You – you're* a Templar! But that goes against everything Father ever …'

'Yes,' I said equably. 'Yes, I am a Templar, and no, it doesn't go against everything our father believed. Since learning of his affiliations I've come to see many similarities between the two factions. I've begun to wonder if, given my roots and my current position within the Order, I'm not perfectly placed to somehow unite Assassin and Templar …'

I stopped. She was slightly drunk, I realized; there was something sloppy about her features all of a sudden, and she made a disgusted noise. 'And what

about *him*? My former fiancé, owner of my heart, the dashing and charming Reginald Birch? What of him, *pray tell*?'

'Reginald is my mentor, my Grand Master. It was he who looked after me in the years after the attack.'

Her face twisted into the nastiest, most bitter sneer I had ever seen. 'Well, weren't *you* the lucky one? While you were being *mentored*, I was being looked after, too – by Turkish slavers.'

I felt as if she could see right through me, as though she could see exactly what my priorities had been all these years, and I dropped my eyes then looked across the cottage to where Holden lay. A room full of my failings.

'I'm sorry,' I said. As if to them both. 'I'm truly sorry.'

'Don't be. I was one of the lucky ones. They kept me pure for selling to the Ottoman court, and after that I was looked after at Topkapı Palace.' She looked away. 'It could have been worse. I was used to it, after all.'

'What?'

'I expect you idolized Father, did you, Haytham? Probably still do. Your sun and moon? "My father my king"? Not me: I hated him. All his talk of freedom – spiritual and intellectual freedom – didn't extend to me, his own daughter. There was no weapons training for me, remember? No "Think differently" for Jenny. There was just "Be a good girl and get married to Reginald Birch." What a great match that would be. I dare say I was treated better by the sultan than I would have been by him. I once told you that our lives were mapped out for us, remember? Well, in one sense I was wrong, of course, because I don't think either of us could have predicted how it would all turn out, but in another sense? In another sense, I couldn't have been more right, Haytham, because you were born to kill, and kill is what you have done, and I was born to serve men, and serve men is what I have done. My days of serving men are over, though. What about you?'

Finished, she hoisted the beaker of wine to her lips and glugged. I wondered what awful memories the drink helped suppress.

'It was your friends the Templars who attacked our home,' she said when her beaker was dry. 'I'm sure of it.'

'You saw no rings, though.'

'No, but so what? What does that mean? They took them off, of course.'

'No. They weren't Templars, Jenny. I've run into them since. They were men for hire. Mercenaries.'

Yes, mercenaries, I thought. *Mercenaries who worked for Edward Braddock, who was close to Reginald …*

I leaned forward. ‘I was told that Father had something – something that they wanted. Do you know what it was?’

‘Oh yes. They had it in the carriage that night.’

‘Well?’

‘It was a book.’

Again I felt a frozen, numb feeling. ‘What sort of book?’

‘Brown, leather-bound, bearing the seal of the Assassins.’

I nodded. ‘Do you think you’d recognize it if you were to see it again?’

She shrugged. ‘Probably,’ she said.

I looked across to where Holden lay, sweat glistening on his torso, ‘When the fever has broken, we’ll leave.’

‘To go where?’

‘To France.’

8 October 1757

i

Though it was cold, the sun was shining this morning, a day best described as ‘sun-dappled’, with bright light pouring through the canopy of trees to paint the forest floor a patchwork of gold.

We rode in a column of three, me in the lead. Behind me was Jenny, who had long since discarded her servant-girl clothes and wore a robe that hung down the flank of her steed. A large, dark hood was pulled up over her head, and her face seemed to loom from within it as though she were staring from the inside of a cave: serious, intense and framed by grey-flecked hair that fell across her shoulders.

Behind her came Holden, who, like me, wore a buttoned-up frock coat, scarf and tricorne hat, only he sagged forward a little in his saddle, his complexion pale, sallow and … haunted.

He had said little since recovering from his fever. There had been moments – tiny glimpses of the old Holden: a fleeting smile, a flash of his London wisdom – but they were fleeting, and he would soon return to being closed off. During our passage across the Mediterranean he had kept himself to himself, sitting alone, brooding. In France we had donned disguises, bought horses and began the trek to the chateau, and he had ridden in silence. He looked pale and, having seen him walk, I thought he was still in pain. Even in the saddle I’d occasionally see him wincing, especially over uneven ground. I could hardly bear to think of the hurt he was enduring – physical and mental.

An hour away from the chateau, we stopped and I strapped my sword to my waist, primed a pistol and put it into my belt. Holden did the same, and I asked him, ‘Are you sure you’re all right to fight, Holden?’

He shot me a reproachful look, and I noticed the bags and dark rings beneath his eyes. ‘Begging your pardon, sir, but it’s my cock and balls they took off me, not my gumption.’

‘I’m sorry, Holden, I didn’t mean to suggest anything. I’ve had my answer and that’s good enough for me.’

‘Do you think there will be fighting, sir?’ he said, and again I saw him wince as he reached to bring his sword close at hand.

‘I don’t know, Holden, I really don’t.’

As we came close to the chateau I saw the first of the patrols. The guard stood in front of my horse and regarded me from beneath the wide brim of his hat: the same man, I realized, who had been here the last time I visited nearly four years ago.

‘That you, Master Kenway?’ he said.

‘Indeed it is, and I have two companions,’ I replied.

I watched him very carefully as his stare went from me to Jenny then to Holden and, though he tried to hide it, his eyes told me all I needed to know.

He went to put his fingers to his mouth, but I had leapt from my horse, grabbed his head and ejected my blade through his eye and into his brain and sliced open his throat before he could make another sound.

ii

I knelt with one hand on the sentry’s chest as the blood oozed fast and thickly from the wide-open gash at his throat, like a second, grinning mouth, and looked back over my shoulder to where Jenny regarded me with a frown and Holden sat upright in his saddle, his sword drawn.

‘Do you mind telling us what *that* was all about?’ asked Jenny.

‘He was about to whistle,’ I replied, scanning the forest around us. ‘He didn’t whistle last time.’

‘So? Perhaps they changed the entry procedure.’

I shook my head. ‘No. They know we’re coming. They’re expecting us. The whistle would have warned the others. We wouldn’t have made it across the lawn before they cut us down.’

‘How do you *know*?’ she said.

‘I don’t *know*,’ I snapped. Beneath my hand the guard’s chest rose and fell one last time. I looked down to see his eyes swivel and his body give one last spasm before he died. ‘I suspect,’ I continued, wiping my bloody hands on the ground and standing up. ‘I’ve spent years suspecting, ignoring the obvious. The book you saw in the carriage that night – Reginald has it with him. He’ll have it in that house if I’m not very much mistaken. It was he who organized the raid on our house. He who is responsible for Father’s death.’

‘Oh, you know that now, do you?’ she sneered.

‘I’d refused to believe it before. But now, yes, I know. Things have begun to make sense to me. Like, one afternoon, when I was a child, I met Reginald by

the plate room. I'd wager he was looking for the book then. The reason he was close to the family, Jenny – the reason he asked for your hand in marriage – was because he wanted the book.'

'You don't have to tell me,' she said. 'I tried warning you on the night that he was the traitor.'

'I know,' I said, then thought for a moment. 'Did Father know he was a Templar?'

'Not at first, but I found out, and I told Father.'

'That's when they argued,' I said, understanding now.

'*Did* they argue?'

'I heard them one day. And, afterwards, Father employed the guards – Assassins, no doubt. Reginald told me he was warning Father …'

'More lies, Haytham …'

I looked up at her, trembling slightly. Yes. More lies. Everything I knew – my entire childhood, all of it built on a foundation of them.

'He was using Digweed,' I said. 'It was Digweed who told him where the book was stored …'

I winced at a sudden memory.

'What is it?' she said.

'The day at the plate room, Reginald was asking me where my sword was kept. I told him a secret hiding place.'

'Was it in the billiards room?'

I nodded.

'They went straight there, didn't they?' she said.

I nodded. 'They knew it wasn't in the plate room, because Digweed told them it had been moved, which is why they went straight to the games room.'

'But they weren't Templars?' she said.

'I beg your pardon.'

'In Syria, you told me the men who attacked us *weren't* Templars,' she said with a mocking tone. 'They *couldn't* be your beloved Templars.'

I shook my head. 'No, they weren't. I told you, I've encountered them since, and they were Braddock's men. Reginald must have planned to school me in the Order …' I thought again, and something occurred to me: ' … because of the family inheritance, probably. Using Templar men would have been too much of a risk. I might have found out. I might have arrived here sooner. I almost got to Digweed. I almost had them in the Black Forest but then …' I remembered back to the cabin in the Black Forest. 'Reginald killed Digweed. That's why they were one step ahead of us – and they still are.' I pointed in the direction of the chateau.

'So what do we do, sir?' asked Holden.

‘We do what they did the night they attacked us at Queen Anne’s Square. We wait until nightfall. And then we go in there, and we kill people.’

9 October 1757

i

That date above says 9 October, which I scribbled there, rather optimistically, at the end of the previous entry, intending that this should be a contemporaneous account of our attempt to breach the chateau. In fact, I'm writing this several months later and, to detail what happened that night, I have to cast my mind back …

ii

How many would there be? Six, on the last occasion I came. Would Reginald have strengthened the force in the meantime, knowing I might come? I thought so. Doubled it.

Make it twelve, then, plus John Harrison, if he was still in residence. And, of course, Reginald. He was fifty-two, and his skills would have faded but, even so: I knew never to underestimate him.

So we waited, and hoped they'd do what they eventually did, which was to send out a search party for the missing patrol, three of them, who came bearing torches and drawn swords, marching across the dark lawn with torchlight dancing on grim faces.

We watched as they materialized from the gloom and melted away into the trees. At the gates they began calling the guard's name then hurried along the outside of the low perimeter towards where the patrol was supposed to be.

His body was where I'd left it, and in the trees nearby Holden, Jenny and I took up position. Jenny stayed back, armed with a knife but out of the action; Holden and I were further forward, where we both climbed trees – Holden with some difficulty – to watch and wait, steeling ourselves as the search party came across the body.

'He's dead, sir.'

The party leader craned over the body. 'Some hours ago.'

I gave a bird call, a signal to Jenny, who did what we'd agreed. Her scream for help was launched from deep within the forest and pierced the night.

With a nervous nod, the party leader led his men into the trees, and they thundered towards us, to where we perched, waiting for them. I looked through the trees to see the shape of Holden a few yards away and wondered if he was well enough, and I hoped to dear God he was, because in the next moment the patrol was running into the trees below us and I launched myself from the branch.

I took out the leader first, ejecting my blade so it went through his eye and into his brain, killing him instantly. From my crouching position I sliced up and back and opened the stomach of the second man, who dropped to his knees with his insides glistening through a gaping hole in his tunic then fell face first to the soft forest floor. Looking over, I saw the third man drop off the point of Holden's sword, and Holden look over, even in the dark the triumph written all over his face.

'Good screaming,' I said to Jenny, moments later.

'Pleased to be of assistance.' She frowned. 'But listen, Haytham, I'm not staying in the shadows when we get there.' She raised the knife. 'I want to deal with Birch myself. He took my life away from me. Any mercy he showed by not having me killed I shall repay by leaving him his cock and …'

She stopped and looked over at Holden, who knelt nearby and looked away.

'I'm …' she began.

'That's all right, Miss,' said Holden. He raised his head and, with a look I'd never seen on his face before, said, 'But you make sure you *do* take his cock and balls before you finish him. You make that bastard *suffer*.'

iii

We made our way around the perimeter back to the gate, where a lone sentry looked agitated, perhaps wondering where the search party had got to; perhaps sensing something was wrong, his soldier's instinct at work.

But whatever instinct he had wasn't enough to keep him alive, and moments later we were ducking through the wicket gate and keeping low to make our way across the lawn. We stopped and knelt by a fountain, holding our breaths at the sound of four more men who came from the front door of the chateau, boots drumming on the paving, calling names. A search party sent to find the first search party. The chateau was on full alert now. So much for a quiet entry. At least we'd reduced their numbers by …

Eight. On my signal, Holden and I burst from behind the cover of the fountain base and were upon them, cutting all three down before they even had a chance to draw their swords. We'd been seen. From the chateau there came a shout, and in the next instant was the sharp report of musket fire and balls smacking into the fountain behind us. We ran for it. Towards the front door, where another guard saw us coming and, as I thundered up the short steps towards him, tried to escape through it.

He was too slow. I rammed my blade through the closing door and into the side of his face, using my forward momentum to shove open the door and burst through, rolling into the entrance hall as he fell away with blood sluicing from his shattered jaw. From the landing above came the crack of musket fire, but the gunman had aimed too high and the ball smacked harmlessly into wood. In an instant I was on my feet and charging towards the stairway, bounding up towards the landing, where the sniper abandoned his musket with a yell of frustration, pulled his sword from its sheath and came to meet me.

There was terror in his eyes; my blood was up. I felt more animal than man, working on pure instinct, as though I had levitated from my own body and was watching myself fight. In moments I had opened the gunman and toppled him over the banister to the entrance hall below, where another guard had arrived, just in time to meet Holden as he burst through the front door with Jenny behind him. I leapt from the landing with a shout, landing softly on the body of the man I'd just thrown over and forcing the new arrival to swing about and protect his rear. It was all the opportunity Holden needed to run him through.

With a nod I turned and ran back up the stairs, in time to see a figure appear on the landing, and I ducked at the crack of gunfire as a ball slapped into the stone wall behind me. It was John Harrison and I was upon him before he had a chance to draw his dagger, snatching a fistful of his nightshirt and forcing him to his knees, drawing back my blade arm to strike.

'Did you *know*?' I snarled. 'Did you help take my father and corrupt my *life*?'

He dropped his head in assent and I plunged the blade into the back of his neck, severing the vertebrae, killing him instantly.

I drew my sword. At Reginald's door, I halted, throwing a look up and down the landing, then leaned back and was about to kick it open when I realized it was already ajar. Crouching, I pushed it, and it swung inwards with a creaking sound.

Reginald stood, dressed, at the centre of his chamber. Just like him, always such a stickler for etiquette – he had dressed to meet his killers. Suddenly there was a shadow on the wall, cast by a figure hidden behind the door and, rather than wait for the trap to be sprung, I rammed the sword through the wood, heard

a scream of pain from the other side then stepped through and let the door swing closed with the body of the final guard pinned to it, staring at the sword through his chest with wide, disbelieving eyes as his feet scrabbled on the wooden floor.

'Haytham,' said Reginald coolly.

iv

'Was he the last of the guards?' I asked, shoulders heaving as I caught my breath. Behind me, the feet of the dying man still scuffed the wood, and I could hear Jenny and Holden on the other side of the door, struggling to open it with his writhing body in the way. At last, with a final cough, he died, his body dropped from the blade, and Holden and Jenny burst in.

'Yes,' nodded Reginald. 'Just me now.

'Monica and Lucio – are they safe?'

'In their quarters, yes, along the hall.'

'Holden, would you do me a favour?' I asked over my shoulder. 'Would you go and see that Monica and Lucio are unharmed? Their condition may well help determine how much pain we put Mr Birch through.'

Holden pulled the body of the guard away from the door, said, 'Yes, sir,' and left, shutting the door behind him, with a certain finality about the way he did it that wasn't lost on Reginald.

Reginald smiled. A long, slow, sad smile. 'I did what I did for the good of the Order, Haytham. For the good of all humanity.'

'At the expense of my father's life. *You destroyed our family*. Did you think I'd never find out?'

He shook his head sadly. 'My dear boy, as Grand Master, you have to make difficult decisions. Did I not teach you that? I promoted you to Grand Master of the Colonial Rite, knowing that you, too, would have to make similar decisions and having faith in your ability to make them, Haytham. Decisions made in the pursuit of a greater good. In pursuit of an ideal *you* share, remember? You ask, did I think you'd ever find out? And of course the answer is yes. You are resourceful and tenacious. I trained you to be that way. I had to consider the possibility that, one day, you'd learn the truth, but I hoped that when that day arrived you'd take a more philosophical view.' His smile was strained. 'Given the body count, I'm to assume disappointment in that regard, am I?'

I gave a dry laugh. 'Indeed, Reginald. Indeed you are. What you did is a corruption of everything I believe, and do you know why? You did it not with the application of our ideals but with deceit. How can we inspire belief when what we have in our heart is lies?'

He shook his head disgustedly. ‘Oh, come on, that’s naive rubbish. I’d have expected it of you as a young Adept, but now? During a war, you do what you can to secure victory. It’s what you do with that victory that counts.’

‘No. We must practise what we preach. Otherwise, our words are hollow.’

‘There speaks the Assassin in you,’ he said, his eyebrows arched.

I shrugged. ‘I’m not ashamed of my roots. I’ve had years to reconcile my Assassin blood with my Templar beliefs, and I have done so.’

I could hear Jenny breathing by my side, wet, ragged breaths that even now were quickening.

‘Ah, so this is it,’ scoffed Reginald. ‘You consider yourself a moderate, do you?’

I said nothing.

‘And you think you can change things?’ he asked with a curled lip.

But the next person to speak was Jenny. ‘No, Reginald,’ she said. ‘Killing you is to take revenge for what you have done to us.’

He turned his attention to her, acknowledging her presence for the first time. ‘And how are you, Jenny?’ he asked her, raising his chin slightly then adding, disingenuously, ‘Time has not withered you, I see.’

She was making a low, growling sound now. From the corner of my eye I saw the hand holding the knife come forward threateningly. So did he.

‘And your life as a concubine,’ he went on, ‘was it a rewarding time for you? I should imagine you got to see so much of the world, so many different people and varied cultures …’

He was trying to goad her, and it worked. With a howl of rage born of years of subjugation she lunged at him as though to slash him with the knife.

‘No, Jenny …!’ I shouted, but too late, because of course he was ready for her. She was doing exactly what he’d hoped she’d do and, as she came within striking distance, he snatched out his own dagger – it must have been tucked into the back of his belt – and avoided her knife swipe with ease. Then she was howling in pain and indignation as he snatched and twisted her wrist, her knife dropped to the wood and his arm locked around her neck with his blade held to her throat.

Over her shoulder, he looked at me, and his eyes twinkled. I was on the balls of my feet, ready to spring forward, but he pushed the blade to her throat and she whimpered, both of her arms at his forearm trying to dislodge his grip.

‘Uh-uh,’ he warned, and already he was edging around, keeping the knife to her throat, pulling her back towards the door, the expression on his face changing, though, from triumph to irritation, as she began to struggle.

‘Keep still,’ he told her through gritted teeth.

‘Do as he says, Jenny,’ I urged, but she was thrashing in his grip, perspiration-soaked hair plastered to her face, as though she were so revolted by being held by him that she would rather be cut than spend another second in such close proximity. And cut she was, blood flowing down her neck.

‘Will you hold still, woman!’ he snapped, beginning to lose his composure. ‘For the love of God, do you want to die here?’

‘Better that and my brother put you to death than allow you to escape,’ she hissed, and continued to strain against him. I saw her eyes flick to the floor. Not far away from where they struggled was the body of the guard, and I realized what she was doing a second before it happened: Reginald stumbled against an outstretched leg of the corpse and lost his footing. Just a little. But enough. Enough so that when Jenny, with a yell of effort, thrust backwards, he tripped over the corpse and lost his balance, thumping heavily against the door – where my sword was still stuck fast through the wood.

His mouth opened in a silent shout of shock and pain. He still held Jenny, but his grip relaxed and she dropped forward, leaving Reginald pinned to the door and looking from me to his chest where the point of the sword protruded from it. When he pulled a pained face there was blood on his teeth. And then, slowly, he slid from the sword and joined the first guard on the floor, his hands at the hole in his chest, blood soaking his clothes and already beginning to pool on the floor.

Turning his head slightly, he was able to look up at me. ‘I tried to do what was right, Haytham,’ he said. His eyebrows knitted together. ‘Surely you can understand that?’

I looked down upon him and I grieved, but not for him – for the childhood he’d taken from me.

‘No,’ I told him, and, as the light faded in his eyes, I hoped he would take my dispassion with him to the other side.

‘Bastard!’ screamed Jenny from behind me. She had pulled herself to her hands and knees, where she snarled like an animal, ‘Count yourself lucky I didn’t take your balls,’ but I don’t think Reginald heard her. Those words would have to remain in the corporeal world. He was dead.

v

From outside there was a noise, and I stepped over the body and pulled the door open, ready to meet more guards if need be. Instead I was greeted by the sight of Monica and Lucio passing by on the landing, both clutching bundles and being ushered towards the stairs by Holden. They had the pale, gaunt faces of the long-

incarcerated, and when they looked over the rail to the entrance hall beneath the sight of the bodies made Monica gasp and clutch her hand to her mouth in shock.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said, not quite sure what I was apologizing for. For surprising them? For the bodies? For the fact that they had been held hostage for four years?

Lucio shot me a look of pure hatred then looked away.

‘We don’t want your apologies, thank you, sir,’ replied Monica in broken English. ‘We thank you for setting us free at last.’

‘If you wait for us, we’ll be leaving in the morning,’ I said. ‘If that’s all right with you, Holden?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘I think we would rather set off as soon as we have gathered together what supplies we need to return home,’ replied Monica.

‘Please wait,’ I said, and could hear the fatigue in my voice. ‘Monica. Lucio. Please wait, and we shall all travel together in the morning, to ensure you have safe passage.’

‘No, thank you, sir.’ They had reached the bottom of the stairs, and Monica turned her face to look up at me. ‘I think you have done quite enough. We know where the stables are. If we could help ourselves to supplies from the kitchen and then horses …’

‘Of course. Of course. Do you have … do you have anything to defend yourselves with, should you run into bandits?’ I bounded quickly down the stairs and reached to take a sword from one of the dead guards. I handed to Lucio, offering him the handle.

‘Lucio, take this,’ I said. ‘You’ll need it to protect your mother as you make your way home.’

He grasped the sword, looked up at me, and I thought I saw a softening in his eyes.

Then he plunged it into me.

27 January 1758

Death. There had been so much of it, and would be more to come.

Years ago, when I had killed the fixer in the Black Forest, it was my mistake to stab him in the kidney and quicken his demise. When Lucio thrust his sword into me in the entrance hall of the chateau, he had quite by chance missed any of my vital organs. His blow was struck with ferocity. As with Jenny, his was an anger born of years of pent-up anger and vengeful dreams. And, as I myself was a man who had spent my entire life seeking revenge, I could hardly blame him for it. But he didn't kill me, obviously, for I'm writing this.

It was enough to cause me serious injury, though, and for the rest of the year I had lain in bed at the chateau. I had stood on a precipice over death's great infinity, drifting in and out of consciousness, wounded, infected and feverish but wearily fighting on, some weak and flickering flame of spirit within me refusing to be doused.

The roles were reversed, and this time it was Holden's turn to tend to me. Whenever I recovered consciousness and awoke from thrashing in sweat-soaked sheets, he would be there, smoothing out the linen, applying fresh cold flannels to my burning brow, soothing me.

'It's all right, sir, it's all right. Just you relax. You're over the worst now.'

Was I? Was I over the worst?

One day – how long into my fever I've no idea – I woke up and, gripping Holden's upper arm, pulled myself into a sitting position, staring intensely into his eyes to ask, 'Lucio. Monica. Where are they?'

I'd had this image – an image of a furious, vengeful Holden cutting them both down.

'Last thing you said before you blacked out was to spare them, sir,' he said, with a look that suggested he wasn't happy about it, 'so spare them's what I did. We sent them on their way with horses and supplies.'

'Good, good …' I wheezed and felt the dark rising to claim me again. 'You can't blame …'

'Cowardly is what it was,' he was saying ruefully as I lost consciousness again. 'No other word for it, sir. Cowardly. Now just you close your eyes, get

your rest …’

I saw Jenny, too, and even in my feverish, injured state couldn’t help but notice the change in her. It was as though she had achieved an inner peace. Once or twice I was aware of her sitting by the side of my bed, and heard her talking about life at Queen Anne’s Square, how she planned to return and, as she put it, ‘take care of business’.

I dreaded to think. Even half-conscious I found it in my heart to pity the poor souls in charge of the Kenways’ affairs when my sister Jenny returned to the fold.

On a table by the side of my bed lay Reginald’s Templar ring, but I didn’t put it on, pick it up, even touch it. For now, at least, I felt neither Templar nor Assassin, and wanted nothing to do with either order.

And then, some three months after Lucio had stabbed me, I climbed out of bed.

Taking a deep breath, with Holden gripping my left forearm in both of his hands, I swept my feet out from underneath the sheets, put them to the cold wooden floor and felt my nightshirt slide down to my knees as I stood upright for the first time in what felt like a lifetime. Straight away, I felt a twinge of pain from the wound at my side and put my hand there.

‘It was badly infected, sir,’ explained Holden. ‘We had to cut away some of the rotted skin.’

I grimaced.

‘Where do you want to go, sir?’ asked Holden, after we’d walked slowly from the bed to the doorway. It made me feel like an invalid, but I was happy for the moment to be treated like one. My strength would soon return. And then I would be …

Back to my old self? I wondered …

‘I think I want to look out of the window, Holden, please,’ I said, and he agreed, leading me over to it so that I could gaze out over the grounds where I’d spent so much of my childhood. As I stood there, I realized that, for most of my adult life, when I’d thought of ‘home’, I’d pictured myself staring out of a window, either over the gardens of Queen Anne’s Square or the grounds of the chateau. I’d called both of them home and still did, and now – now that I knew the full truth about Father and Reginald – they’d come to acquire an even greater significance, a duality almost: two halves of my boyhood, two parts of the man I became.

‘That’s enough, thank you, Holden,’ I said, and let him lead me back to the bed. I climbed in, suddenly feeling … I hate to admit it, but ‘frail’, after my long journey all the way to the window and back again.

Even so, my recovery was almost complete and the thought was enough to bring a smile to my face as Holden busied himself collecting a beaker of water and a used flannel, on his face a strange, grim, unreadable expression.

‘It’s good to see you back on your feet, sir,’ he said, when he realized I was looking at him.

‘I’ve got you to thank, Holden,’ I said.

‘And Miss Jenny, sir,’ he reminded me.

‘Indeed.’

‘We were both worried about you for a while, sir. It was touch and go.’

‘Quite something it would have been, to have lived through wars, Assassins and murderous eunuchs, only to die at the hands of a slip of a boy.’ I chuckled.

He nodded and laughed drily. ‘Quite so, sir,’ he agreed. ‘A bitter irony indeed.’

‘Well, I live to fight another day,’ I said, ‘and soon, maybe in a week or so, we shall take our leave, travel back to the Americas and there continue my work.’

He looked at me, nodded. ‘As you wish, sir,’ he said. ‘Will that be all for the time being, sir?’

‘Yes – yes, of course. Sorry, Holden, to be such a bother these past few months.’

‘My only wish has been to see you recover, sir,’ he said, and left.

28 January 1758

The first thing I heard this morning was a scream. Jenny's scream. She had walked into the kitchen and found Holden hanging from a clothes dryer.

I knew even before she rushed into my room – I knew what had happened. He'd left a note but he hadn't needed to. He had killed himself because of what the Coptic priests had done to him. It was as simple as that, and no surprise, not really.

I knew from the death of my father that a state of stupefaction is a good index of the grieving to come. The more paralysed, dazed and numb one feels, the longer and more intense the period of mourning.

Part Four

1774, Sixteen Years Later

12 January 1774

i

Writing this at the end of an eventful evening, there is but one question on my mind. Is it possible that …

That I have a son?

The answer is I don't know for sure, but there are clues and perhaps most persistently, a *feeling* – a feeling that constantly nags at me, tugging on the hem of my coat like an insistent beggar.

It's not the only weight I carry, of course. There are days I feel bent double with memory, with doubt, regret and grief. Days when it feels as if the ghosts won't leave me alone.

After we buried Holden I departed for the Americas, and Jenny returned to live in England, back at Queen Anne's Square, where she has stayed in glorious spinsterhood ever since. No doubt she's been the subject of endless gossip and speculation about the years she spent away, and no doubt that suits her down to the ground. We correspond, but though I'd like to say our shared experiences had brought us together, the bald fact of the matter is they hadn't. We corresponded because we shared the Kenway name and felt we should stay in touch. Jenny no longer insulted me, so in that sense I suppose our relationship had improved, but our letters were weary and perfunctory. We were two people who had experienced enough suffering and loss to last a dozen lifetimes. What could we possibly discuss in a letter? Nothing. So nothing was what we discussed.

In the meantime – I had been right – I had mourned for Holden. I never knew a greater man than him, and I never will. For him, though, the strength and character he had in abundance just wasn't enough. His manhood had been taken from him. He couldn't live with that, wasn't prepared to, and so he had waited until I was recovered then taken his own life.

I grieved for him and probably always will, and I grieved for Reginald's betrayal, too – for the relationship we once had and for the lies and treachery on which my life was based. And I grieved for the man I had been. The pain in my side had never quite gone away – every now and then it would spasm – and

despite the fact that I hadn't given my body permission to grow older, it was determined to do so anyway. Small, wiry hairs had sprouted from my ears and nose. All of a sudden I wasn't as lithe as I once was. Though my standing within the Order was grander than ever, physically I was not the man I once was. On my return to the Americas I'd found a homestead in Virginia on which to grow tobacco and wheat, and I'd ride around the estate, aware of my powers slowly waning as the years passed. Climbing on and off my horse was harder than it had been before. And I don't mean *hard*, just harder, because I was still stronger and faster and more agile than a man half my age and there wasn't a worker on my estate who could best me physically. But even so … I wasn't as fast, as strong or as nimble as I had been once. Age had not forgotten to claim me.

In '73, Charles returned to the Americas, too, and became a neighbour, a fellow Virginian estate owner, a mere half-day's ride away, and we had corresponded, agreeing that we needed to meet to talk Templar business and plan to further the interests of the Colonial Rite. Mainly we discussed the developing mood of rebellion, the seeds of revolution floating on the breeze and how best to capitalize on the mood, because our colonials were growing more and more tired of new rules being enforced by the British parliament: the Stamp Act; the Revenue Act; the Indemnity Act; the Commissioners of Customs Act. They were being squeezed for taxes and resented the fact that there was nobody to represent their views, to register their discontent.

A certain George Washington was among the discontents. That young officer who once rode with Braddock had resigned his commission and accepted land bounty for helping the British during the French and Indian War. But his sympathies had shifted in the intervening years. The bright-eyed officer whom I had admired for having a compassionate outlook – more than his commander at least – was now one of the loudest voices in the anti-British movement. No doubt this was because the interests of His Majesty's government conflicted with his own business ambitions; he'd made representations at the Virginia Assembly to try to introduce legislation banning the import of goods from Great Britain. The fact that it was a doomed legislation only added to the growing sense of national discontent.

The Tea Party, when it happened in December '73 – just last month, in fact – was the culmination of years – no, *decades* – of dissatisfaction. By turning the harbour into the world's biggest cup of tea, the colonists were telling Great Britain and the world that they were no longer prepared to live under an unjust system. A full-scale uprising was surely just a matter of months away. So, with the same amount of enthusiasm as I tended my crops, or wrote to Jenny, or climbed out of bed each morning – in other words, very little – I decided it was

time for the Order to make preparations for the coming revolution, and I called a meeting.

ii

We assembled, all of us together for the first time in over fifteen years, the men of the Colonial Rite with whom I had shared so many adventures twenty years ago.

We were gathered beneath the low beams of a deserted tavern called the Restless Ghost on the outskirts of Boston. It hadn't been deserted when we'd arrived, but Thomas had seen to it that we soon had the place to ourselves, literally chasing out the few drinkers who were huddled over the wooden tables. Those of us who usually wore a uniform were wearing civilian clothes, with buttoned-up coats and hats pulled down over our eyes, and we sat around a table with tankards close at hand: me, Charles Lee, Benjamin Church, Thomas Hickey, William Johnson and John Pitcairn.

And it was here that I first learnt about the boy.

Benjamin addressed the subject first. He was our man inside Boston's Sons of Liberty, a group of patriots, anti-British colonists who had helped organize the Boston Tea Party, and two years ago, in Martha's Vineyard, he'd had an encounter.

'A native boy,' he said. 'Not someone I'd ever seen before …'

'Not someone you *remember* seeing before, Benjamin,' I corrected.

He pulled a face. 'Not someone I *remember* seeing before, then,' he amended. 'A boy who strode up to me and, bold as brass, demanded to know where Charles was.'

I turned to Charles. 'He's asking for you, then. Do you know who it is?'

'No.' But there was something shifty about the way he said it.

'I'll try again, Charles. Do you have a suspicion who this boy might be?'

He leaned back in his seat and looked away, across the tavern. 'I don't think so,' he said.

'But you're not sure?'

'There was a boy at …'

An uncomfortable silence seemed to descend on the table. The men either reached for their tankards or hunched their shoulders or found something to study in the fire nearby. None would meet my eye.

'How about somebody tells me what's going on?' I asked.

These men – not one of them was a tenth of the man Holden had been. I was sick of them, I realized, heartily sick of them. And my feelings were about to

intensify.

It was Charles – Charles who was the first to look across the table, hold my gaze and tell me, ‘Your Mohawk woman.’

‘What about her?’

‘I’m sorry, Haytham,’ he said. ‘Really I am.’

‘She’s dead?’

‘Yes.’

Of course, I thought. So much death. ‘When? How?’

‘It was during the war. In ’60. Fourteen years ago now. Her village was attacked and burned.’

I felt my mouth tighten.

‘It was Washington,’ he said quickly, glancing at me. ‘George Washington and his men. They burned the village and your … she died with it.’

‘You were there?’

He coloured. ‘Yes, we’d hoped to speak to the village elders about the precursor site. There was nothing I could do, though, Haytham, I can assure you. Washington and his men galumphing all over the place. There was a bloodlust on them that day.’

‘And there was a boy?’ I asked him.

His eyes flicked away. ‘Yes, there was a boy – young, about five.’

About five, I thought. I had a vision of Ziio, of the face I’d once loved, when I was capable of doing such a thing, and felt a dull backwash of grief for her and loathing for Washington, who had obviously learnt a thing or two from serving with General Braddock – lessons in brutality and ruthlessness. I thought of the last time she and I had been together, and I pictured her in our small encampment, gazing out into the trees with a faraway look in her eyes and, almost unconsciously, her hands going to her belly.

But no. I cast the idea aside. Too fanciful. Too far-fetched.

‘He threatened me, this boy,’ Charles was saying.

In different circumstances, I might have smiled at the image of Charles, all six foot of him, being threatened by a five-year-old native boy – if I hadn’t been trying to absorb the death of Ziio, that was – and I took a deep but almost imperceptible breath, feeling the air in my chest, and dismissed the image of her.

‘I wasn’t the only one of us there,’ said Charles defensively, and I looked around the table enquiringly.

‘Go on, then. Who else?’

William, Thomas and Benjamin all nodded, their eyes fixed on the dark, knotted wood of the tabletop.

‘It can’t have been him,’ said William crossly. ‘Can’t have been the same kid, surely.’

‘Come on, ’Aytham, what are the chances?’ chimed Thomas Hickey.

‘And you didn’t recognize him at Martha’s Vineyard?’ I asked Benjamin now.

He shook his head, shrugged. ‘It was just a kid, an Indian kid. They all look the same, don’t they?’

‘And what were you doing there, in Martha’s Vineyard?’

His voice was testy. ‘Having a break.’

Or making plans to line your pockets, I thought, and said, ‘Really?’

He pursed his lips. ‘If things go as we think, and the rebels organize themselves into an army, then I’m in line to be made chief physician, Master Kenway,’ he said, ‘one of the most senior positions in the army. I think that, rather than questioning why I was in Martha’s Vineyard that day, you might have some words of congratulation for me.’

He cast around the table for support and was greeted with hesitant nods from Thomas and William, both of them giving me a sideways look at the same time.

I conceded. ‘And I have completely forgotten my manners, Benjamin. Indeed it will be a great boost for the Order the day you achieve that rank.’

Charles cleared his throat loudly. ‘While we also hope that if such an army is formed, our very own Charles will be appointed its commander-in-chief.’

I didn’t see exactly, as the light in the tavern was so low, but I could sense Charles redden. ‘We do more than merely *hope*,’ he protested. ‘I am the obvious candidate. My military experience far outstrips that of George Washington.’

‘Yes, but you are *English*, Charles,’ I sighed.

‘*Born* in England,’ he spluttered, ‘but a colonial in my heart.’

‘What’s in your heart may not be enough,’ I said.

‘We shall see,’ he returned indignantly.

We would, indeed, I thought wearily, then turned my attention to William, who had been cagey so far, although, as the one who would have been most affected by the events of the Tea Party, it was obvious why.

‘And what of your assignment, William? How go the plans to purchase the native land?’

We all knew, of course, but it had to be said, and it had to be said by William, whether he liked it or not. ‘The Confederacy has given the deal its blessing …’ he started.

‘But … ?’

He took a deep breath. ‘You know, of course, Master Kenway, of our plans to raise funds …’

‘Tea leaves?’

‘And you know, of course, all about the Boston Tea Party?’

I held up my hands. ‘The repercussions have been felt worldwide. First the Stamp Act, now this. Our colonists are revolting, are they not?’

William shot me a reproachful look. ‘I’m glad it’s a situation that amuses you, Master Kenway.’

I shrugged. ‘The beauty of our approach is that we have all the angles covered. Here around the table we have representatives of the colonials’ – I pointed at Benjamin; ‘of the British Army’ – I indicated John; ‘and of course our very own man for hire, Thomas Hickey. On the outside, your affiliations could not be more different. What you have in your heart are the ideals of the Order. So, you’ll have to excuse me, William, if I remain in good humour despite your setback. It’s only because I believe that it *is* just a setback, a minor one at that.’

‘Well, I hope you’re right, Master Kenway, because the fact of the matter is that that avenue of fundraising is now closed to us.’

‘Because of the rebels’ actions …’

‘Exactly. And there’s another thing …’

‘What?’ I asked, sensing all eyes on me.

‘The boy was there. He was one of the ringleaders. He threw crates of tea into the harbour. We all saw him. Me, John, Charles …’

‘The same boy?’

‘Almost certainly,’ said William, ‘his necklace was exactly as Benjamin described it.’

‘Necklace?’ I said. ‘What sort of necklace?’ And I kept my face impassive, tried not to swallow even, as Benjamin went on to describe Ziio’s necklace.

It didn’t mean anything, I told myself, when they’d finished. Ziio was dead, so of course the necklace would have been passed on – if it was even the same one.

‘There’s something else, isn’t there?’ I sighed, looking at their faces.

As one, they nodded, but it was Charles who spoke. ‘When Benjamin encountered him at Martha’s Vineyard, he was a normal-looking kid. During the Tea Party, he wasn’t a normal-looking kid any more. He wore the robes, Haytham,’ said Charles.

‘The robes?’

‘Of an Assassin.’

27 June 1776 (Two Years Later)

i

It was this time last year that I was proved right and Charles wrong, when George Washington was indeed appointed the commander-in-chief of the newly formed Continental Army and Charles made major-general.

And while I was far from pleased to hear the news, Charles was incandescent, and hadn't stopped fuming since. He was fond of saying that George Washington wasn't fit to command a sergeant's guard. Which, of course, as is often the case, was neither true nor an outright falsehood. While on the one hand Washington displayed elements of naivety in his leadership, on the other he had secured some notable victories, most importantly the liberation of Boston in March. He also had the confidence and trust of his people. There was no doubt about it, he had some good qualities.

But he wasn't a Templar, and we wanted the revolution led by one of our own. Not only did we plan to be in control of the winning side, but we thought we had more chance of winning with Charles in charge. And so, we hatched a plot to kill Washington. As simple as that. A plot that would be proceeding nicely but for one thing: this young Assassin. This Assassin – who may or may not be my son – who continued to be a thorn in our side.

ii

First was William. Dead. Killed last year, shortly before the Revolutionary War began. After the Tea Party, William began to broker a deal to buy Indian land. There was much resistance, however, not least among the Iroquois Confederation, who met with William at his home estate. The negotiations had begun well, by all accounts, but, as is the way of things, something was said and things took a turn for the worse.

'Brothers, please,' William had pleaded, 'I am confident we will find a solution.'

But the Iroquois were not listening. The land was theirs, they argued. They closed their ears to the logic offered by William, which was that, if the land passed into Templar hands, then we could keep it from the clutches of whichever force emerged victorious from the forthcoming conflict.

Dissent bubbled through the members of the native confederation. Doubt lurked among them. Some argued that they could never contend with the might of the British or colonial armies themselves; others felt that entering into a deal with William offered no better solution. They had forgotten how the Templars freed their people from Silas's slavery two decades before; instead they remembered the expeditions William had organized into the forest to try to locate the precursor site; the excavations at the chamber we had found. Those outrages were fresh in their minds, impossible to overlook.

'Peace, peace,' argued William. 'Have I not always been an advocate? Have I not always sought to protect you from harm?'

'If you wish to protect us, then give us arms. Muskets and horses that we might defend ourselves,' argued a Confederation member in response.

'War is not the answer,' pressed William.

'We remember you moved the borders. Even today your men dig up the land – showing no regard for those who live upon it. Your words are honeyed, but false. We are not here to negotiate. Nor to sell. We are here to tell you and yours to leave these lands.'

Regrettably, William resorted to force to make his point, and a native was shot, with the threat of more deaths to come unless the Confederation signed the contract.

The men said no, to their credit; they refused to be bowed by William's show of force. What a bitter vindication it must have been as their men began to fall with musket balls in their skulls.

And then the boy appeared. I had William's man describe him to me in detail, and what he said matched exactly what Benjamin had said about the encounter in Martha's Vineyard, and what Charles, William and John had seen at Boston harbour. He wore the same necklace, the same Assassin's robes. It was the same boy.

'This boy, what did he say to William?' I asked the soldier who stood before me.

'He said he planned to ensure an end to Master Johnson's schemes, stop him claiming these lands for the Templars.'

'Did William respond?'

'Indeed he did, sir, he told his killer that the Templars had tried to claim the land in order to protect the Indians. He told the boy that neither King George nor

the colonists cared enough to protect the interests of the Iroquois.'

I rolled my eyes. 'Not an especially convincing argument, given that he was in the process of slaughtering the natives when the boy struck.'

The soldier bowed his head. 'Possibly not, sir.'

iii

If I was a little too philosophical when it came to William's death, well, there were extenuating factors. William, though diligent in his work and dedicated, was never the most good-humoured of people and, by meeting a situation that called for diplomacy with force, he'd made a pig's ear of the negotiations. Though it pains me to say it, he had been the architect of his own downfall, and I'm afraid I've never been one for tolerating incompetence: not as a young man, when I suppose it was something I'd inherited from Reginald; and now, having passed my fiftieth birthday, even less so. William had been a bloody fool and paid for it with his life. Equally, the project to secure the native land, while important to us, was no longer our main priority; it hadn't been since the outbreak of war. Our main task now was to assume control of the army and, fair means having failed, we were resorting to foul – by assassinating Washington.

However, that plan was dealt a blow when the Assassin next targeted John, our British army officer, striking at him because of John's work weeding out the rebels. Again, though it was irritating to lose such a valuable man, it might not have affected our plans but for the fact that in John's pocket was a letter – unfortunately, one that detailed plans to kill Washington, naming our Thomas Hickey as the man elected to do the deed. In short order, the youthful Assassin was hotfooting it to New York, with Thomas next on his list.

Thomas was counterfeiting money there, helping to raise funds as well as preparing for the assassination of Washington. Charles was already there with the Continental Army, so I slipped into the city myself and took lodgings. And no sooner had I arrived than I was given the news: the boy had reached Thomas, only for the pair of them to be arrested and both of them tossed in Bridewell Prison.

'There can be no further mistakes, Thomas, am I understood?' I told him when I visited him, shivering in the cold and revolted by the smell, clamour and noise of the jail, when, suddenly, in the cell next door, I saw him: the Assassin.

And knew. He had his mother's eyes, the same jet-black hair, the proud set of his chin. He was the image of her. Without a doubt, he was my son.

‘It’s him,’ said Charles, as we left the prison together. I gave a start, but he didn’t notice: New York was freezing, our breath hung in clouds, and he was far too preoccupied with keeping warm.

‘It’s who?’

‘The boy.’

I knew exactly what he meant of course.

‘What the hell are you talking about, Charles?’ I said crossly, and blew into my hands.

‘Do you remember me telling you about a boy I encountered back in ’60, when Washington’s men attacked the Indian village?’

‘Yes, I remember. And this is our Assassin, is it? The same one as at Boston harbour? The same one who killed William and John? That’s the boy who’s in there now?’

‘It would seem so, Haytham, yes.’

I rounded on him.

‘Do you see what this means, Charles? We have *created* that Assassin. In him burns a hatred of all Templars. He saw you the day his village burned, yes?’

‘Yes – yes, I’ve already told you …’

‘I expect he saw your ring, too. I expect he wore the imprint of your ring on his own skin for some weeks after your encounter. Am I right, Charles?’

‘Your concern for the child is touching, Haytham. You always were a great supporter of the natives …’

The words froze on his lips because, in the next instant, I’d bunched some of his cape in my fist and thrust him against the stone wall of the prison. I towered over him, and my eyes burned into his.

‘My concern is for the Order,’ I said. ‘My *only* concern is for the Order. And, correct me if I’m wrong, Charles, but the Order does not preach the senseless slaughter of natives, the burning of their villages. That, I seem to recall, was noticeably absent from my teachings. Do you know why? Because it’s the kind of behaviour that creates – how would you describe it? – “ill will” among those we might hope to win over to our way of thinking. It sends neutrals scuttling to the side of our enemies. Just as it has here. Men are dead and our plans under threat because of your behaviour sixteen years ago.’

‘Not my behaviour – Washington is –’

I let him go, took a step back and clasped my hands behind me. ‘Washington will pay for what he has done. We will see to that. He is brutal, that is clear, and not fit to lead.’

‘I agree, Haytham, and I’ve already taken a step to ensure that there are no more interruptions, to kill two birds with one stone, as it were.’

I looked sharply at him. ‘Go on.’

‘The native boy is to be hanged for plotting to kill George Washington and for the murder of the prison warden. Washington will be there, of course – I plan to make sure of it – and we can use the opportunity to kill him. Thomas, of course, is more than happy to take on the task. It only falls to you, as Grand Master of the Colonial Rite, to give the mission your blessing.’

‘It’s short notice,’ I said, and could hear the doubt in my own voice. But why? Why did I even care any more who lived or died?

Charles spread his hands. ‘It is short notice, but sometimes the best plans are.’

‘Indeed,’ I agreed. ‘Indeed.’

‘Well?’

I thought. With one word, I would ratify the execution of my own child. What manner of monster could do such a thing?

‘Do it,’ I said.

‘Very well,’ he replied, with a sudden, chest-puffed satisfaction. ‘Then we won’t waste a single moment more. We shall put the word out across New York tonight that tomorrow a traitor to the revolution meets his end.’

v

It is too late for me to feel paternal now. Whatever inside me that might once have been capable of nurturing my child had long since been corrupted or burned away. Years of betrayal and slaughter have seen to that.

28 June 1776

i

This morning I woke up in my lodgings with a start, sitting upright in bed and looking around the unfamiliar room. Outside the window, the streets of New York were stirring. Did I imagine it, or was there a charge in the air, an excited edge to the chatter that rose to my window? And, if there was, did it have anything to do with the fact that today there was an execution in town? Today they would hang …

Connor, that's his name. That's the name Ziio gave him. I wondered how different things might have been, had we brought him into this world together.

Would Connor still be his name?

Would he still have chosen the path of the Assassin?

And if the answer to that question was, No, he wouldn't have chosen the path of an Assassin because his father was a Templar, then what did that make me but an abomination, an accident, a mongrel? A man with divided loyalties.

But a man who had decided he could not allow his son to die. Not today.

I dressed, not in my normal clothes but in a dark robe with a hood which I pulled up over my head, then hurried for the stables, found my horse and urged her onwards to the execution square, over muddy streets packed hard, startled city folk scuttling out of my way and shaking their fists at me or staring wide-eyed from beneath the brims of their hats. I thundered on, towards where the crowds became thicker as onlookers congregated for the hanging to come.

And, as I rode, I wondered what I was doing and realized I didn't know. All I knew was how I felt, which was as though I had been asleep but suddenly was awake.

ii

There, on a platform, the gallows awaited its next victim, while a decent-sized crowd was anticipating the day's entertainment. Around the sides of the square were horses and carts, on to which families clambered for a better view: craven-

looking men, short women with pinched, worried faces, and grubby children. Sightseers sat in the square while others milled around: women in groups who stood and gossiped, men swigging ale or wine from leather flasks. All of them here to see my son executed.

At one side, a cart flanked by soldiers arrived and I caught a glimpse of Connor inside, before out jumped a grinning Thomas Hickey, who then yanked him from the cart, too, taunting him at the same time, 'Didn't think I'd miss your going-away party, did you? I hear Washington himself will be in attendance. Hope nothing bad happens to him …'

Connor, with his hands bound in front of him, shot a look of hatred at Thomas and, once again, I marvelled at how much of his mother was to be found in those features. But, along with defiance, and bravery, today there was also … fear.

'You said there'd be a trial,' he snapped, as Thomas manhandled him.

'Traitors don't get trials, I'm afraid. Lee and Haytham sorted that out. It's straight to the gallows for you.'

I went cold. Connor was about to go to his death thinking I had signed his death warrant.

'I will not die today,' said Connor, proud. 'The same cannot be said for you.' But he was saying it over his shoulder as the guards who had helped escort the cart into the square used pikestaffs to jab him towards the gallows. The noise swelled as the parting crowd reached to try to grab him, punch him, knock him to the ground. I saw a man with hate in his eyes about to throw a punch and was close enough to snatch the punch as it was thrown, twist the man's arm painfully up his back, then throw him to the ground. With blazing eyes he looked up at me, but the sight of me glaring at him from within my hood stopped him, and he picked himself up and in the next moment was swept away by the seething, unruly crowd.

Meanwhile, Connor had been shoved further along the gauntlet of vengeful abuse, and I was too far away to stop another man who suddenly lunged forward and grabbed him – but near enough to see the man's face beneath his hood; near enough to read his lips.

'You are not alone. Only give a cry when you need it …'

It was Achilles.

He was here – here to save Connor, who was replying, 'Forget about me – you need to stop Hickey. He's –'

But then he was dragged away, and I finished the sentence in my head: … *planning to kill George Washington*.

Talk of the devil. The commander-in-chief had arrived with a small guard. As Connor was pulled on to the platform and an executioner fastened a noose

around his neck, the crowd's attention went to the opposite end of the square, where Washington was being led to a raised platform at the back, which, even now, was being frantically cleared of crowds by the guards. Charles, as major-general, was with him, too, and it gave me an opportunity to compare the two: Charles, a good deal taller than Washington, though with a certain aloofness compared to Washington's easy charm. Looking at them together, I saw at once why the Continental Congress had chosen Washington over him. Charles looked so *British*.

Then Charles had left Washington and with a couple of guards made his way across the square, swatting the crowd out of his way as he came, and then was ascending the steps to the gallows, where he addressed the crowd, which pushed forward. I found myself pressed between bodies, smelling ale and sweat, using my elbows to try and find space within the herd.

'Brothers, sisters, fellow patriots,' began Charles, and an impatient hush descended over the crowd. 'Several days ago we learnt of a scheme so vile, so dastardly that even repeating it now disturbs my being. The man before you plotted to murder our much beloved general.'

The crowd gasped.

'Indeed,' roared Charles, warming to his theme. 'What darkness or madness moved him, none can say. And he himself offers no defence. Shows no remorse. And though we have begged and pleaded for him to share what he knows, he maintains a deadly silence.'

At this, the executioner stepped forward and thrust a hessian sack over Connor's head.

'If the man will not explain himself – if he will not confess and atone – what other option is there but this? He sought to send us into the arms of the enemy. Thus we are compelled by justice to send him from this world. May God have mercy on his soul.'

And now he was finished, and I looked around, trying to spot more of Achilles' men. If it was a rescue mission, then now was the time, surely? But where were they? What the hell were they planning?

A bowman. They had to be using a bowman. It wasn't ideal: an arrow wouldn't sever the rope completely, the best the rescuers could hope for was that it would part the fibre enough for Connor's weight to snap it. But it was the most accurate. It could be deployed from …

Far away. I swung about to check the buildings behind me. Sure enough, at the spot I would have chosen was a bowman, standing at a tall casement window. As I watched, he drew back the bowstring and squinted along the line

of the arrow. Then, just as the trapdoor snapped open and Connor's body dropped, he fired.

The arrow streaked above us, though I was the only one aware of it, and I whipped my gaze over to the platform in time to see it slice the rope and weaken it – of course – but not enough to cut it.

I risked being seen and discovered, but I did what I did anyway, on impulse, on instinct. I snatched my dagger from within my robes, and I threw it, watched as it sailed through the air and thanked God as it sliced into the rope and finished the job.

As Connor's writhing and – thank God – still very much alive body dropped through the trapdoor, a gasp went up around me. For a moment I found myself with about an arm's width of space all around as the crowd recoiled from me in shock. At the same time I caught sight of Achilles ducking down into the gallows pit where Connor's body had fallen. Then I was fighting to escape as the shocked lull was replaced by a vengeful roar, kicks and punches were aimed my way and guards began shouldering their way through the throng towards me. I engaged the blade and cut one or two of the sightseers – enough to draw blood and give other attackers pause for thought. More timid now, they at last made space around me. I dashed out of the square and back to my horse, the catcalls of the angry crowd ringing in my ears.

iii

'He got to Thomas before he could reach Washington,' said Charles despondently later, as we sat in the shadows of the Restless Ghost tavern to talk about the events of the day. He was agitated and constantly looking over his shoulder. He looked like I felt, and I almost envied him the freedom to express his feelings. Me, I had to keep my turmoil hidden. And what turmoil it was: I'd saved the life of my son but effectively sabotaged the work of my own Order – an operation that I myself had decreed. I was a traitor. I had betrayed my people.

'What happened?' I asked.

Connor had reached Thomas and before he killed him was demanding answers. Why had William tried to buy his people's land? Why were we trying to murder Washington?

I nodded. Took a sip of my ale. 'What was Thomas's reply?'

'He said that what Connor sought he'd never find.'

Charles looked at me, his eyes wide and weary.

'What now, Haytham? What now?'

7 January 1778
(Nearly Two Years Later)

i

Charles had begun by resenting Washington, and the fact that our assassination attempt had failed only increased his anger. He took it as a personal affront that Washington had survived – how dare he? – so never quite forgave him for it. Shortly afterwards, New York had fallen to the British, and Washington, who was almost captured, was held to blame, not least by Charles, who was singularly unimpressed by Washington's subsequent foray across the Delaware River, despite the fact that his victory at the Battle of Trenton had renewed confidence in the revolution. For Charles, it was more grist to the mill that Washington went on to lose the Battle of Brandywine and thus Philadelphia. Washington's attack on the British at Germantown had been a catastrophe. And now there was Valley Forge.

After winning the Battle of White Marsh, Washington had taken his troops to what he hoped was a safer location for the new year. Valley Forge, in Pennsylvania, was the high ground he chose: twelve thousand Continentals, so badly equipped and fatigued that the shoeless men left a trail of bloody footprints when they marched to make camp and prepare for the coming winter.

They were a shambles. Food and clothing was in woefully short supply, while horses starved to death or died on their feet. Typhoid, jaundice, dysentery and pneumonia ran unchecked throughout the camp and killed thousands. Morale and discipline were so low as to be virtually non-existent.

Still, though, despite the loss of New York and Philadelphia and the long, slow, freezing death of his army at Valley Forge, Washington had his guardian angel: Connor. And Connor, with the certainty of youth, believed in Washington. No words of mine could possibly persuade him otherwise, that much was for certain; nothing I could have said would convince him that Washington was in fact responsible for the death of his mother. In his mind, it was Templars who were responsible – and who can blame him for coming to that conclusion? After

all, he saw Charles there that day. And not just Charles, but William, Thomas and Benjamin.

Ah, Benjamin. My other problem. He had these past years been something of a disgrace to the Order, to put it mildly. After attempting to sell information to the British, he had been hauled before a court of inquiry in ’75, headed by who else but George Washington. By now Benjamin was, just as he’d predicted all those years ago, the chief physician and director general of the medical service of the Continental Army. He was convicted of ‘communicating with the enemy’ and imprisoned, and, to all intents and purposes, he had remained so until earlier this year, when he had been released – and promptly gone missing.

Whether he had recanted the ideals of the Order, just as Braddock had done all those years ago, I didn’t know. What I did know was that he was likely to be the one behind the theft of supplies bound for Valley Forge, which of course was making matters worse for the poor souls camped there; that he had forsaken the goals of the Order in favour of personal gain; and that he needed to be stopped – a task I’d taken upon myself, starting in the vicinity of Valley Forge and riding through the freezing, snow-covered Philadelphia wilds until I came to the church where Benjamin had made camp.

ii

A church to find a Church. But abandoned. Not just by its erstwhile congregation but by Benjamin’s men. Days ago, they’d been here, but now – nothing. No supplies, no men, just the remains of fires, already cold, and irregular patches of mud and snowless ground where tents had been pitched. I tethered my horse at the back of the church then stepped inside, where it was just as bone-freezing, numbing cold as it was outside. Along the aisle were the remains of more fires and by the door was a pile of wood, which, on closer inspection, I realized was church pews that had been chopped up. Reverence is the first victim of the cold. The remaining pews were in two rows either side of the church, facing an imposing but long-disused pulpit, and dust floated and danced in broad shafts of light projected through grimy windows high up in imposing stone walls. Scattered around a rough stone floor were various upturned crates and the remains of packaging, and for a few moments I paced around, occasionally stooping to overturn a crate in the hope that I might find some clue as to where Benjamin had got to.

Then, a noise – footsteps from the door – and I froze before darting behind the pulpit just as the huge oak doors creaked slowly and ominously open, and a figure entered: a figure who could have been tracing my exact steps, for the way

he seemed to pace around the church floor just as I had done, upturning and investigating crates and even cursing under his breath, just as I had.

It was Connor.

I peered from the shadows behind the pulpit. He wore his Assassin's robes and an intense look, and I watched him for a moment. It was as though I were watching myself – a younger version of myself, as an Assassin, the path I should have taken, the path I was being groomed to take, and would have done, had it not been for the treachery of Reginald Birch. Watching him – Connor – what I felt was a fierce mixture of emotions; among them regret, bitterness, even envy.

I moved closer. Let's see how good an Assassin he really is.

Or, to put it another way, let's see if I still had it.

iii

I did.

'Father,' he said, when I had him down and the blade to his throat.

'Connor,' I said sardonically. 'Any last words?'

'Wait.'

'A poor choice.'

He struggled, and his eyes blazed. 'Come to check up on Church, have you? Make sure he's stolen enough for your British brothers?'

'Benjamin Church is no brother of mine.' I tutted. 'No more than the redcoats or their idiot king. I expected naivety. But this … The Templars do not fight for the Crown. We seek the same as you, boy. Freedom. Justice. Independence.'

'But …'

'But what?' I asked.

'Johnson. Pitcairn. Hickey. They tried to steal land. To sack towns. To murder George Washington.'

I sighed. 'Johnson sought to own the land that we might keep it safe. Pitcairn aimed to encourage diplomacy – which you cocked up thoroughly enough to start a goddamned war. And Hickey? George Washington is a wretched leader. He's lost nearly every battle in which he's taken part. The man's wracked by uncertainty and insecurity. Take one look at Valley Forge and you know my words are true. We'd all be better off without him.'

What I was saying had an effect on him, I could tell. 'Look – much as I'd love to spar with you, Benjamin Church's mouth is as big as his ego. You clearly want the supplies he's stolen; I want him punished. Our interests are aligned.'

'What do you propose?' he said warily.

What *did* I propose? I thought. I saw his eyes go to the amulet at my throat and mine in turn went to the necklace he wore. No doubt his mother told him about the amulet; no doubt he would want to take it from me. On the other hand, the emblems we wore around our necks were both reminders of her.

'A truce,' I said. 'Perhaps – *perhaps* some time together will do us good. You are my son, after all, and might still be saved from your ignorance.'

There was a pause.

'Or I can kill you now, if you'd prefer?' I laughed.

'Do you know where Church has gone?' he asked.

'Afraid not. I'd hoped to ambush him when he or one of his men returned here. But it seems I was too late. They've come and cleared the place out.'

'I may be able to track him,' he said, with an oddly proud note in his voice.

I stood back and watched as he gave me an ostentatious demonstration of Achilles' training, pointing to marks on the church floor where the crates had been dragged.

'The cargo was heavy,' he said. 'It was probably loaded on to a wagon for transport … There were rations inside the crates – medical supplies and clothing as well.'

Outside the church, Connor gestured to some churned-up snow. 'There was a wagon here … slowly weighed down as they loaded it with the supplies. Snow's obscured the tracks, but enough remains that we can still follow. Come on …'

I collected my horse, joined him and together we rode out, Connor indicating the line of the tracks as I tried to keep my admiration from showing. Not for the first time I found myself struck by the similarities in our knowledge, and noted him doing just as I would have done in the same situation. Some fifteen miles out of the camp he twisted in the saddle and shot me a triumphant look, at the same time as he indicated the trail up ahead. There was a broken-down cart, its driver trying to repair the wheel and muttering as we approached: 'Just my luck … Going to freeze to death if I don't get this fixed …'

Surprised, he looked up at our arrival, and his eyes widened in fear. Not far away was his musket, but too far to reach. Instantly, I knew – just as Connor haughtily demanded, 'Are you Benjamin Church's man?' – that he was going to make a run for it, and, sure enough, he did. Wild-eyed, he scrambled to his feet and took off into the trees, wading into the snow with a pronounced, trudging run, as ungainly as a wounded elephant.

'Well played,' I smiled, and Connor flashed me an angry look then leapt from his saddle and dived into the tree line to chase the cart driver. I let him go then sighed and climbed down from my horse, checked my blade and listened to the

commotion from the forest as Connor caught the man, then I strode into the forest to join them.

'It was not wise to run,' Connor was saying. He'd pinned the driver against a tree.

'W – what do you want?' the wretch managed.

'Where is Benjamin Church?'

'I don't know. We was riding for a camp just north of here. It's where we normally unload the cargo. Maybe you'll find him th –'

His eyes darted to me, as if looking for support, so I drew my pistol, and shot him.

'Enough of that,' I said. 'Best be on our way then.'

'You did not have to kill him,' said Connor, wiping the man's blood from his face.

'We know where the camp is,' I told him. 'He'd served his purpose.'

As we returned to our horses, I wondered how I appeared to him. What was I trying to teach him? Did I want him as brittle and worn as I was? Was I trying to show him where the path led?

Lost in thought, we rode towards the site of the camp, and as soon as we saw the tell-tale wafting smoke above the tips of the trees, we dismounted, tethered our horses and continued on foot, passing stealthily and silently through the trees. We stayed in the trees, crawling on our bellies and using my spyglass to squint through trunks and bare branches at distant men who made their way around the camp and clustered around fires trying to keep warm. Connor left, to make his way into the camp, while I made myself comfortable, out of sight.

Or at least I thought so – I thought I was out of sight – until I felt the tickle of a musket at my neck and the words 'Well, well, well, what have we here?'

Cursing, I was dragged to my feet. There were three of them, all looking pleased with themselves to have caught me – as well they should, because I wasn't easily sneaked up on. Ten years ago, I would have heard them and crept noiselessly away. Ten years before that, I would have heard them coming, hidden then taken them all out.

Two held muskets on me while one of them came forward, licking his lips nervously. Making a noise as if impressed, he unfastened my hidden blade then took my sword, dagger and pistol. And only when I was unarmed did he dare relax, grinning to reveal a tiny skyline of blackened and rotting teeth. I did have one hidden weapon, of course: Connor. But where the hell had he got to?

Rotting Teeth stepped forward. Thank God he was so bad at hiding his intentions that I was able to twist away from the knee he drove into my groin, just enough to avoid serious hurt but make him think otherwise, and I yelped in

pretend pain and dropped to the frozen ground, where I stayed for the time being, looking more dazed than I felt and playing for time.

‘Must be a Yank spy,’ said one of the other men. He leaned on his musket to bend and look at me.

‘No. He’s something else,’ said the first one, and he, too, bent to me, as I pulled myself to my hands and knees. ‘Something special. Isn’t that right … *Haytham*? Church told me *all* about you,’ said the foreman.

‘Then you should know better than this,’ I said.

‘You ain’t really in any position to be makin’ threats,’ snarled Rotting Teeth.

‘Not yet,’ I said, calmly.

‘Really?’ said Rotting Teeth. ‘How ’bout we prove otherwise? You ever had a musket butt in your teeth?

‘No, but it looks like you can tell me how it feels.’

‘You what? You tryin’ to be funny?’

My eyes travelled up – up to the branches of a tree behind them, where I saw Connor crouched, his hidden blade extended and a finger to his lips. He would be an expert in the trees, of course, taught no doubt by his mother. She’d tutored me in the finer points of climbing, too. Nobody could move through the trees like her.

I looked up at Rotting Teeth, knowing he had mere seconds’ life to live. It took the sting out of his boot as it connected with my jaw, and I was lifted and sent flying backwards, landing in a heap in a small thicket.

Perhaps now would be a good time, Connor, I thought. Through eyesight glazed with pain I was rewarded by seeing Connor drop from his perch, his blade hand shoot forward then its blood-flecked silver steel appear from within the mouth of the first luckless guard. The other two were dead by the time I pulled myself to my feet.

‘New York,’ said Connor.

‘What about it?’

‘That’s where Benjamin is to be found.’

‘Then that’s where we need to be.’

26 January 1778

i

New York had changed since I last visited, to say the least: it had burned. The great fire of September ’76 had started in the Fighting Cocks tavern, destroyed over five hundred homes and left around a quarter of the city burnt out and uninhabitable. The British had put the city under martial law as a result. People’s homes had been seized and given to British Army officers; the churches had been converted into prisons, barracks or infirmaries; and it was as though the very spirit of the city had somehow been dimmed. Now it was the Union flag that hung limply from flagpoles at the summit of orange-brick buildings, and where, before, the city had an energy and bustle about it – life beneath its canopies and porticos and behind its windows – now those same canopies were dirty and tattered, the windows blackened with soot. Life went on, but the townsfolk barely raised their eyes from the street. Now, their shoulders were drooped, their movements dispirited.

In such a climate, finding Benjamin’s whereabouts had not been difficult. He was in an abandoned brewery on the waterfront, it turned out.

‘We should be done with this by sunrise,’ I rather rashly predicted.

‘Good,’ replied Connor. ‘I would like to have those supplies returned as soon as possible.’

‘Of course. I wouldn’t want to keep you from your lost cause. Come on then, follow me.’

To the roofs we went and, moments later, we were looking out over the New York skyline, momentarily awed by the sight of it, in all its war-torn, tattered glory.

‘Tell me something,’ Connor said after some moments. ‘You could have killed me when we first met – what stayed your hand?’

I could have let you die at the gallows, I thought. I could have had Thomas kill you in Bridewell Prison. What stayed my hand on those two occasions also? What was the answer? Was I getting old? Sentimental? Perhaps I was nostalgic for a life I never really had.

None of this I especially cared to share with Connor, however, and, eventually, after a pause, I dismissed his question with: ‘Curiosity. Any other questions?’

‘What is it the Templars seek?’

‘Order,’ I said. ‘Purpose. Direction. No more than that. It’s your lot that means to confound us with all that nonsense talk of freedom. Once upon a time, the Assassins professed a more sensible goal – that of peace.’

‘Freedom *is* peace,’ he insisted.

‘No. It is an invitation to chaos. Only look at this little revolution your friends have started. I have stood before the Continental Congress. Listened to them stamp and shout. All in the name of liberty. But it’s just a noise.’

‘And this is why you favour Charles Lee?’

‘He understands the needs of this would-be nation far better than the jobbernowls who profess to represent it.’

‘It seems to me your tongue has tasted sour grapes,’ he said. ‘The people made their choice – and it was Washington.’

There it was again. I almost envied him, how he looked at the world in such an unequivocal way. His was a world free of doubt, it seemed. When he eventually learnt the truth about Washington, which, if my plan succeeded, would be soon, his world – and not just his world but his *entire* worldview – would be shattered. If I envied him his certainty now, I didn’t envy him that.

‘The people chose nothing.’ I sighed. ‘It was done by a group of privileged cowards seeking only to enrich themselves. They convened in private and made a decision that would benefit them. They may have dressed it up with pretty words, but that doesn’t make it true. The only difference, Connor – the only difference between myself and those you aid – is that I do not feign affection.’

He looked at me. Not long ago, I had said to myself that my words would never have any effect on him, yet here I was trying anyway. And maybe I was wrong – maybe what I said was getting through.

ii

At the brewery, it became apparent that we needed a disguise for Connor, his Assassin’s robes being a little on the conspicuous side. Procuring one gave him a chance to show off again, and once more I was stingy with my praise. When we were both suitably attired we made our way towards the compound, the red-brick walls towering above us, the dark windows staring implacably upon us. Through the gates I could see the barrels and carts of the brewery business, as well as men walking to and fro. Benjamin had replaced most of the Templar men

with mercenaries of his own; it was history repeating itself, I thought, my mind going back to Edward Braddock. I only hoped Benjamin wouldn't be as tough to kill as Braddock. Somehow, I doubted it. I had little faith in the calibre of my enemy these days.

I had little faith in anything these days.

'Hold, strangers!' A guard stepped out of the shadows, disturbing the fog that swirled around our ankles. 'You tread on private property. What business have you here?'

I tipped the brim of my hat to show him my face. 'The Father of Understanding guides us,' I said, and the man seemed to relax, though he looked warily at Connor. 'You, I recognize,' he said, 'but not the savage.'

'He's my son,' I said, and it was … odd, hearing the sentiment upon my own lips.

The guard, meanwhile, was studying Connor carefully then, with a sideways glance, said to me, 'Tasted of the forest's fruits, did you?'

I let him live. For now. Just smiled instead.

'Off you go, then,' he said, and we strode through the arched gate and into the main compound of the Smith & Company Brewery. There we quickly ducked into a covered section, with a series of doors leading into warehouses and office space. Straight away I set to picking the lock of the first door we came to as Connor kept watch, talking at the same time.

'It must be strange to you, discovering my existence as you have,' he said.

'I'm actually curious to know what your mother said about me,' I replied, working the lock-pick. 'I often wondered what life might have been like, had she and I stayed together.' Acting on an instinct, I asked him, 'How is she, by the way?'

'Dead,' he said. 'She was murdered.'

By Washington, I thought, but said nothing, except, 'I'm sorry to hear that.'

'Really? It was done by your men.'

By now I'd opened the door but instead of going through I closed it and turned to face Connor. *'What?'*

'I was just a child when they came looking for the elders. I knew they were dangerous even then, so I stayed silent. Charles Lee beat me unconscious for it.'

So I had been right. Charles had indeed left the physical as well as the metaphorical imprint of his Templar ring on Connor.

It was not hard to let the horror show on my face, although I pretended to be shocked as he continued, 'When I woke, I found my village in flames. Your men were gone by then, as well as any hope for my mother's survival.'

Now – now was an opportunity to try to convince him of the truth.

‘Impossible,’ I said. ‘I gave no such order. Spoke of the opposite, in fact – I told them to give up the search for the precursor site. We were to focus on more practical pursuits …’

Connor looked dubious but shrugged. ‘It doesn’t matter. It’s long done now.’

Oh, but it did, it did matter.

‘But you’ve grown up all your life believing me – your own father – responsible for this atrocity. I had no hand in it.’

‘Maybe you speak true. Maybe not. How am I ever to know?’

iii

Silently, we let ourselves into the warehouse, where stacked barrels seemed to crowd out any light and not far away stood a figure with his back to us, the only sound the soft scratching he made as he wrote in a ledger he held. I recognized him at once, of course, and drew a long breath before calling out to him.

‘Benjamin Church,’ I announced, ‘you stand accused of betraying the Templar Order and abandoning our principles in pursuit of personal gain. In consideration of your crimes, I hereby sentence you to death.’

Benjamin turned. Only it wasn’t Benjamin. It was a decoy – who suddenly cried, ‘Now, *now*!’, at which the room was full of men who rushed from hiding places, holding pistols and swords on us.

‘You’re too late,’ crowed the decoy. ‘Church and the cargo are long gone. And I’m afraid you won’t be in any condition to follow.’

We stood, the men assembled before us, and thanked God for Achilles and his training, because we were both thinking the same things. We were thinking: when facing superior strength, wrest from them the element of surprise. We were thinking: turn defence into attack.

So that’s what we did. We attacked. With a quick glance at one another we both released our blades, both sprung forward, both embedded them into the nearest guard, whose screams echoed around the brick walls of the warehouse. I kicked out and sent one of their gunmen skidding back and smashing his head against a crate, then was upon him, my knees on his chest, driving the blade through his face and into his brain.

I twisted in time to see Connor whirl, keeping low and slicing his blade hand around at the same time, opening the stomachs of two luckless guards, who both dropped, clutching at their gaping stomachs, both dead men who didn’t know it yet. A musket went off, and I heard the air sing, knowing the ball had just missed me but making the sniper pay for it with his life. Two men came towards me, swinging wildly, and as I took them both down I thanked our lucky stars that

Benjamin had used mercenaries rather than Templar men, who wouldn't have been so swiftly overcome.

As it was, the fight was short and brutal, until just the decoy was left and Connor was looming over him as he trembled like a frightened child on the brickwork floor now slick with blood.

I finished a dying man then strode over to hear Connor demand, 'Where's Church?'

'I'll tell you,' wailed the decoy, 'anything you want. Only promise that you'll let me live.'

Connor looked at me and, whether or not we agreed, he helped him to his feet. With a nervous glance from one to the other of us, the decoy continued, 'He left yesterday for Martinique. Took passage on a trading sloop called the *Welcome*. Loaded half its hold with the supplies he stole from the patriots. That's all I know. I swear.'

Standing behind him, I thrust my blade into his spinal cord and he stared in blank amazement at the bloodstained tip as it protruded from his chest.

'You promised …' he said.

'And *he* kept his word,' I said coldly, and looked at Connor, almost daring him to contradict me. 'Let's go,' I added, just as a trio of riflemen rushed on to the balcony above us with a clatter of boots on wood, tucked their rifle musket butts into their shoulders and opened fire. But not at us, at barrels nearby, which, too late, I realized were full of gunpowder.

I just had time to heave Connor behind some beer barrels as the first of the kegs went up, followed by the ones around it, each exploding with a deafening thunderclap that seemed to bend the air and stop time – a blast so fierce that, when I opened my eyes and took my hands away from my ears, I found I was almost surprised the warehouse was still standing around us. Every man in the place had either hurled himself to the ground or been thrown there by the force of the explosion. But the guards were picking themselves up, reaching for their muskets and, still deafened, shouting at each other as they squinted through the dust for us. Flames were licking up the barrels; crates catching fire. Not far away, a guard came running on to the warehouse floor, his clothes and hair ablaze, screamed as his face melted then sank to his knees and died face down to the stone. The greedy fire found some nearby crate stuffing, which went up in an instant. All around us, an inferno.

Musket balls began zipping around us. We felled two swordsmen on our way to the steps leading up to the gantry then hacked our way through a squad of four riflemen. The fire was rising quickly – even the guards were beginning to escape

now – so we ran to the next level, climbing up and up, until at last we'd reached the attic of the brewery warehouse.

Our assailants were behind us, but not the flames. Looking out of a window, we could see water below us, and I cast around for an exit. Connor grabbed me and swung me towards the window, smashing the two of us through the glass so that we dropped to the water before I'd even had a chance to protest.

7 March 1778

i

There was no way I was going to let Benjamin get away. Not having had to put up with life on the *Aquila* for almost a month, trapped with Connor's friend and ship's captain Robert Faulkner, among others, chasing Benjamin's schooner, which had stayed just out of our reach, dodging cannon attacks, catching tantalizing glimpses of him on the deck of his ship, his taunting face … No way was I going to let him get away. Especially as we came so near in waters close to the Gulf of Mexico, the *Aquila* at last racing up alongside his schooner.

Which was why I snatched the ship's wheel from Connor, wrenched it hard starboard and with a lurch sent the ship speeding towards the schooner. Nobody had expected that to happen. Not the crew of his ship. Not the men on the *Aquila*, not Connor or Robert – only me; and I'm not sure I knew until I did it, when any crew member who wasn't hanging on to something was thrown violently to the side and the prow of the *Aquila* crunched into the schooner's port side at an angle, breaching and splintering the hull. Perhaps it was rash of me. Perhaps I would owe Connor – and certainly Faulkner – an apology for the damage done to their ship.

But I couldn't let him get away.

ii

For a moment there was a stunned silence, just the sound of ship debris slapping against the ocean around, and the groan and creek of battered, distressed timber. The sails fluttered in a gentle breeze above us, but neither ship moved, as though both were immobilized by the shock of the impact.

And then, just as suddenly, a cry went up as the crew from both ships recovered their senses. I was ahead of Connor and had already dashed to the prow of the *Aquila*, swinging to the deck of Benjamin's schooner, where I hit the wood with extended blade and killed the first crew member who raised a weapon towards me, stabbing him and swinging his writhing body overboard.

Spotting the hatch, I ran to it, hauled out a sailor trying to escape and punched the blade into his chest before taking the steps and, with a final look at the devastation I'd caused, as the two huge ships locked together and began slowly to turn in the ocean, I slammed the hatch closed behind me.

From above came the thunder of feet on deck, the muted screams and gun blasts of battle and the thud of bodies hitting the wood. Below decks, there was a strange, damp, almost eerie silence. But, from further along, I realized, came the slosh and drip that told me the schooner was taking on water. I grabbed a wooden strut as it suddenly listed and, somewhere, the drip of water became a constant flow. How long would it remain afloat? I wondered.

Meantime, I saw what Connor would soon discover: that the supplies we'd spent so long in pursuit of were non-existent – or on this ship anyway.

Just as I was absorbing this, I heard a noise and twisted to see Benjamin Church holding a pistol two-handed on me, squinting along its sights.

'Hello, Haytham,' he snarled, and pulled the trigger.

He was good. I knew that. It was why he pulled the trigger right away, to put me down while he still had the element of surprise; and why he didn't aim directly for me but at a spot slightly to my right, because I'm a right-sided fighter and would naturally dive to my strongest side.

But of course I knew that because I'd trained him. And his shot smacked harmlessly into the hull when I dived, not to the right but to the left, rolled then came to my feet, pounced and was upon him before he could draw his sword. With a fistful of his shirt in my hand I snatched his pistol and tossed it away.

'We had a dream, Benjamin,' I snarled into his face, 'a dream you sought to destroy. And for that, my fallen friend, you will be made to pay.'

I kneed him in the groin. When he doubled over, gasping with pain, I drove my fist into his abdomen then followed it up with a punch to the jaw that was hard enough to send two bloodied teeth skittering along the deck.

I let him drop, and he fell to where the wood was already wet, his face splashing into a wash of incoming seawater. Again the ship lurched but, for the moment, I didn't care. When Benjamin tried to get to his hands and knees I lashed out with my boot, kicking whatever breath he had left out of him. Next I grabbed a length of rope and hauled him to his feet, shoved him against a barrel then wound it around him, securing him fast. His head dropped forward, trails of blood, spit and snot spooling slowly to the wood below. I stood back, took hold of his hair then looked into his eyes, drove a fist into his face and heard the crunch of his breaking nose then stood back, shaking the blood from my knuckles.

‘Enough!’ cried Connor from behind me, and I turned to see him staring at me, and then at Benjamin, with a disgusted look on his face.

‘We came here for a reason …’ he said.

I shook my head. ‘Different reasons, it seems.’

But Connor pushed past me and waded through water, now ankle deep, to Benjamin, who regarded him with defiance in his bruised and bloodshot eyes.

‘Where are the supplies you stole?’ Connor demanded.

Benjamin spat. ‘Go to hell.’ And then, incredibly, began to sing: ‘Rule Britannia’.

I stepped forward. ‘Shut your mouth, Church.’

Not that it stopped him. He continued singing.

‘Connor,’ I said, ‘get what you need from him and let’s be done with this.’

And at last Connor stepped forward, his blade engaged, and held it to Benjamin’s throat.

‘I ask again,’ said Connor: ‘where is your cargo?’

Benjamin looked at him and blinked. For a moment I thought his next move would be to insult or spit at Connor, but instead he began to speak. ‘On the island yonder, awaiting pick-up. But you’ve no right to it. It isn’t yours.’

‘No, not mine,’ said Connor. ‘Those supplies are made for men and women who believe in something bigger than themselves, who fight and die that one day they may live free from tyranny such as yours.’

Benjamin smiled sadly. ‘Are these the same men and women who fight with muskets forged from British steel? Who bind their wounds with bandages sown by British hands? How convenient for them that we do the work. They reap the rewards.’

‘You spin a story to excuse your crimes. As though you’re the innocent one and they the thieves,’ argued Connor.

‘It’s all a matter of perspective. There is no single path through life that is right and fair and does no harm. Do you truly think the Crown has no cause? No right to feel betrayed? You should know better than this, dedicated as you are to fighting Templars – who themselves see their work as just. Think on that the next time you insist that your work alone befits the greater good. Your enemy would beg to differ – and would not be without cause.’

‘Your words may have been sincere,’ whispered Connor, ‘but it does not make them true.’

And he finished him.

‘You did well,’ I said as Benjamin’s chin dropped to his chest and his blood splashed to the water that continued to rise. ‘His passing is a boon for us both.

Come on. I suppose you’ll want my help retrieving everything from the island …’

16 June 1778

i

It had been months since I'd last seen him, yet I cannot deny I thought of him often. When I did, I thought, What hope is there for us? Me, a Templar – a Templar forged in the crucible of treachery, but a Templar nevertheless – and him an Assassin, created by the butchery of the Templars.

Once upon a time, many years ago, I'd dreamed of one day uniting Assassin and Templar, but I was a younger and more idealistic man then. The world had yet to show me its true face. And its true face was unforgiving, cruel and pitiless, barbaric and brutal. There was no place in it for dreams.

And yet, he came to me again, and though he said nothing – not so far anyway – I wondered if the idealism I'd once had lurked behind those eyes, and it was that which brought him once more to my door in New York, seeking answers perhaps, or wanting an end to some doubt that nagged at him.

Perhaps I was wrong. Perhaps there was an uncertainty that resided within that young soul after all.

New York was still in the grip of the redcoats, squads of them out on the streets. It was years later, and still nobody had been held responsible for the fire that had plunged the city into a grimy, soot-stained depression. Parts of it were still uninhabitable. Martial law continued, the redcoats' rule was harsh and the people more resentful than ever. As an outsider I studied the two groups of people, the downtrodden city folk giving hateful looks to the brutalized, unruly soldiers. I watched them with a jaundiced eye. And, dutifully, I continued. I worked to try to help win this war, end the occupation, find peace.

I was grilling one of my informants, a wretch named Twitch – because of something he did with his nose – when I saw Connor out of the corner of my eye. I held up a hand to stop him while I continued listening to Twitch, and wondered what he wanted. What business did he have with the man he believed had given the order to kill his mother?

'We need to know what the loyalists are planning if we are to put an end to this,' I said to my man. Connor loitered, overhearing – not that it mattered.

‘I’ve tried,’ responded Twitch, as his nostrils flared and his eyes darted to Connor, ‘but the soldiers themselves are told nothing now: only to await orders from above.’

‘Then keep digging. Come and find me when you have something worth sharing.’

Twitch nodded, slunk off, and I took a deep breath to face Connor. For a moment or so we regarded one another, and I looked him up and down, his Assassin’s robes somehow at odds with the young Indian boy beneath, his long dark hair, those piercing eyes – Ziio’s eyes. What lay behind them? I wondered.

Above us, a flock of birds made itself comfortable on the ledge of a building, cawing loudly. Nearby, a patrol of redcoats lounged by a cart to admire passing laundry women, making lewd suggestions and responding to any disapproving looks and tuts with threatening gestures.

‘We’re so close to victory,’ I told Connor, taking his arm and leading him further down the street, away from the redcoats. ‘Just a few more well-placed attacks and we can end the civil war and be rid of the Crown.’

An almost-smile at the edges of his mouth betrayed a certain satisfaction. ‘What did you intend?’

‘Nothing at the moment – since we’re completely in the dark.’

‘I thought Templars had eyes and ears everywhere,’ he said, with just a hint of dry humour. Just like his mother.

‘We did. Until you started cutting them off.’

He smiled. ‘Your contact said it was orders from above. It tells us exactly what we need to do: track down other loyalist commanders.’

‘The soldiers answer to the Jaegers,’ I said. ‘The Jaegers to the commanders, which means … we work our way up the chain.’

I looked up. Not far away, the redcoats were still being lewd, letting down their uniform, the flag and King George. The Jaegers were the link between the army high-ups and the troops on the ground and were supposed to keep the redcoats in check, stop them aggravating an already hostile populace, but they rarely showed their faces, only if there was real trouble on the streets. Like if someone, say, killed a redcoat. Or two.

From my robes I drew my pistol and pointed it across the street. I saw Connor’s mouth drop open out of the corner of my eye as I took aim at the unruly group of redcoats near the cart, picked one who, even now, was making an off-colour suggestion to a woman, who walked past with swishing skirts and her head bowed, blushing beneath her bonnet. And pulled the trigger.

The report of my gun cracked open the day and the redcoat staggered back, a penny-sized hole between his eyes already beginning to leak dark-red blood as

his musket dropped and he fell heavily back into a cart and lay still.

For a moment the other redcoats were too shocked to do anything, their heads swinging this way and that as they tried to locate the source of the gunshot while pulling their rifles from their shoulders.

I began to make my way across the street.

'What you doing?' called Connor after me.

'Kill enough, and the Jaegers will appear,' I told him. 'They'll lead us right back to those in charge' – and as one of the redcoats turned to me and went to jab with his bayonet, I swept the blade across his front, slicing through his white criss-crossed belts, his tunic and his stomach. I laid into the next one straight away, while another, who tried to retreat and find space to raise his weapon and fire, backed straight into Connor and in the next instant was sliding off his blade.

The battle was over, and the street, busy before, was suddenly empty. At the same time I heard bells, and winked. 'The Jaegers are out, just as I said they'd be.'

It was a matter of trapping one, a task I was happy to leave to Connor, and he didn't let me down. In less than an hour we had a letter, and as groups of Jaegers and redcoats ran shouting up and down the streets, angrily searching for the two Assassins – *'Assassins, I tell you. They used the blade of the Hashashin'* – who had so mercilessly cut down one of their patrols, we took to the roofs, where we sat and read it.

'The letter's encrypted,' said Connor.

'Not to worry,' I said. 'I know the cipher. After all, it's a Templar invention.'

I read it then explained. 'The British command is in disarray. The Howe brothers have resigned and Cornwallis and Clinton have left the city. The leadership that remains has called a meeting at the ruins of Trinity Church. It's there we should go.'

ii

The Trinity Church was at the intersection of Wall Street and Broadway. Or, I should say, what was left of the Trinity Church was at the intersection of Wall Street and Broadway. It had been badly burned in the great fire of September '76, so badly burned, in fact, that the British hadn't bothered to try to convert it to use as barracks, or to imprison patriots. Instead they'd constructed a fence and used it for occasions such as this – the meeting of commanders that Connor and I fully intended to gatecrash.

Wall Street and Broadway were both dark. The lamplighters didn't come here because there were no lamps to light, none in working order anyway. Like

everything else within about a mile's radius of the church, they were blackened and soot-covered, their windows smashed. And what would they illuminate anyway? The greyed-out, broken windows of the surrounding buildings? Empty stone and wooden carcasses fit only for habitation by stray dogs and vermin.

Above it all towered the spire of Trinity, and it was there we headed, scaling one of the remaining walls of the church in order to take up position. As we climbed I realized that what the building reminded me of was an enlarged version of my home at Queen Anne's Square, how it had looked after the fire. And as we crouched in the shadowy alcoves awaiting the arrival of the redcoats, I recalled the day I'd gone back to the house with Reginald and how it had looked. Like the church, its roof had been taken by fire. Like the church, it was a shell, a shadow of its former self. Above us, the stars twinkled in the sky, and I stared at them for a moment through the open roof, until an elbow in my side roused me from my reverie and Connor was indicating down to where officers and redcoats were making their way along the deserted rubble of Wall Street towards the church. As they approached, two men ahead of the squad were pulling a cart and hanging lanterns in the black and brittle branches of the trees, lighting the way. They reached the church and we cast our eyes downwards as they hung more lanterns below. They moved quickly among the truncated columns of the church, where weeds, moss and grass had begun to grow, nature claiming the ruins for herself, and placed lanterns on the font and lectern, then stood to one side as the delegates strode in: three commanders and a squad of soldiers.

Next we were both straining to hear the conversation and having no luck. Instead I counted the guards, twelve of them, but I didn't think it too many.

'They're talking in circles,' I hissed to Connor. 'We'll learn nothing, watching as we are.'

'What do you propose?' he replied. 'That we get down there and demand answers?'

I looked at him. Grinned. 'Well, yes,' I said.

And in the next instant I was climbing down until I was close enough, and jumped down, surprising two of the guards at the rear, who died, their mouths making an O shape.

'Ambush!' went the cry as I piled into two more of the redcoats. From above I heard Connor curse as he leapt from his perch to join me.

I was right. There weren't too many. The redcoats, as ever, were too reliant on muskets and bayonets. Effective on the battlefield, perhaps, but useless at close-quarter combat, which was where Connor and I excelled. We were fighting well together by now, almost a partnership. Before long, the moss-covered figurines

of the burnt-out church sparkled with fresh redcoat blood, the twelve guards were dead and just the three terrified commanders remained, cowering, lips moving in prayer as they prepared to die.

I had something else in mind – a trip to Fort George, to be precise.

iii

In southernmost Manhattan was Fort George. Over one hundred and fifty years old, from the sea it presented a vast skyline of spires, watchtowers and long barracks buildings that seemed to run across the entire length of the promontory, while inside the towering battlements were expanses of drill square surrounding the tall dormitories and administrative buildings, all of it heavily defended and fortified. A perfect place for the Templars to make their base. A perfect place for us to take the three loyalist commanders.

'What are the British planning?' I asked the first one, after lashing him to a chair in an interrogation room deep in the bowels of the North End building, where the smell of damp was all-pervasive and where, if you listened carefully, you could just hear the scratching and gnawing of the rats.

'Why should I tell you?' he sneered.

'Because I'll kill you if you don't.'

His arms were bound, but he indicated the interrogation room with his chin. 'You'll kill me if I do.'

I smiled. 'Many years ago I met a man named Cutter, an expert in torture and the administration of pain, who was able to keep his victims alive for days on end, but in considerable pain, with only …' I flicked the mechanism of the blade and it appeared, glinting cruelly in the flickering torchlight.

He looked at it. 'You promise me a quick death if I tell you.'

'You have my word.'

So he did, and I kept my word. When it was over I strode out into the passageway outside, where I ignored Connor's inquisitive look and collected the second prisoner. Back in the cell I tied him to the chair and watched as his eyes went to the body of the first man.

'Your friend refused to tell me what I wanted to know,' I explained, 'which is why I slit his throat. Are you prepared to tell me what I want to know?'

Wide-eyed, he gulped, 'Look, whatever it is, I can't tell you – I don't even know. Maybe the commander …'

'Oh, you're not the man in charge?' I said breezily, and flicked my blade.

'Wait a minute …' he blurted, as I moved to the back of him. 'There is one thing I know …'

I stopped. ‘Go on …’

He told me and, when it was over, I thanked him and drew the blade across his throat. As he died, I realized that what I felt was not the righteous fire of one who performs repellent acts in the name of a greater good but a sense of jaded inevitability. Many years ago, my father had taught me about mercy, about clemency. Now I slaughtered prisoners like livestock. This was how corrupt I had become.

‘What’s going on in there?’ asked Connor suspiciously, when I returned to the passageway where he guarded the final prisoner.

‘This one is the commander. Bring him in.’

Moments later, the door to the interrogation room thumped shut behind us, and for a moment the only sound in the room was that of dripping blood. Seeing the bodies discarded in a corner of the cell, the commander struggled, but, with a hand to his shoulder, I shoved him to the chair, now slick with blood, lashed him to it, then stood before him and flicked my finger to engage my hidden blade. It made a soft snicking sound in the cell.

The officer’s eyes went to it and then to me. He was trying to put on a brave face, but there was no disguising the tremble of his lower lip.

‘What are the British planning?’ I asked him.

Connor’s eyes were on me. The prisoner’s eyes were on me. When he stayed silent I raised the blade slightly so that it reflected the flickering torchlight. Again, his eyes were fixed on it, and then, he broke …

‘To – to march from Philadelphia. That city is finished. New York is the key. They’ll double our numbers – push back the rebels.’

‘When do they begin?’ I asked.

‘Two days from now.’

‘June the 18th,’ said Connor from beside me. ‘I need to warn Washington.’

‘See?’ I told the commander. ‘That wasn’t very difficult now, was it?’

‘I told you everything. Now let me go,’ he said, but I was again in no mood for clemency. I stood behind him and, as Connor watched, opened his throat. At the boy’s horrified look, I said, ‘And the other two said the same. It must be true.’

When Connor looked at me, it was with disgust. ‘You killed him … killed all of them. Why?’

‘They would have warned the loyalists,’ I answered simply.

‘You could have held them until the fight was done.’

‘Not far away from here is Wallabout Bay,’ I said, ‘where the prison ship HMS *Jersey* is moored, a rotting ship on which patriot prisoners of war are

dying by the thousands, buried in shallow graves on the shores or simply tossed overboard. That was how the British treat *their* prisoners, Connor.'

He acknowledged the point but countered, 'Which is why we must be free of their tyranny.'

'Ah, tyranny. Don't forget that your leader George Washington could save these men on the prison ships, if he was so minded. But he does not want to exchange captured British soldiers for captured American ones, and so the American prisoners of war are sentenced to rot on the prison ships of Wallabout Bay. That's your hero George Washington at work. However this revolution ends, Connor, you can guarantee that it's the men with riches and land who will benefit. The slaves, the poor, the enlisted men – they will still be left to rot.'

'George is different,' he said, but yes, now there was a note of doubt in his voice.

'You will see his true face soon, Connor. It will reveal itself, and when it does you can make your decision. You can judge him.'

17 June 1778

i

Though I'd heard so much about it, I hadn't seen Valley Forge with my own eyes, and there, this morning, was where I found myself.

Things had clearly improved, that much was certain. The snow had gone; the sun was out. As we walked, I saw a squad being put through its paces by a man with a Prussian accent, who, if I wasn't very much mistaken, was the famous Baron Friedrich von Steuben, Washington's chief of staff, who had played his part in whipping his army into shape. And indeed he had. Where before the men had been lacking in morale and discipline, suffering from disease and malnutrition, now the camp was full of healthy, well-fed troops who marched with a lively clatter of weapons and flasks, a hurry and purpose to their step. Weaving among them were camp followers who carried baskets of supplies and laundry, or steaming pots and kettles for the fires. Even the dogs that chased and played at the margins of the camp seemed to do so with a renewed energy and vigour. Here, I realized, was where independence could be born: with spirit, co-operation, and fortitude.

Nevertheless, as Connor and I strode through the camp, what struck me was that it was largely due to the efforts of Assassins and Templars that the camp had improved in spirit. We had secured the supplies and prevented more theft, and I was told that Connor had had a hand in securing the safety of von Steuben. What had their glorious leader Washington done, except for leading them into that mess in the first place?

Still, though, they believed in him.

All the more reason his mendacity should be exposed. All the more reason Connor should see his true face.

'We should be sharing what we know with Lee, not Washington …' I said irritably as we walked.

'You seem to think I favour him,' replied Connor. His guard was down and his black hair shone in the sun. Here, away from the city, it was as if his native side had bloomed. 'But my enemy is a notion, not a nation. It is wrong to compel

obedience – whether to the British Crown or the Templar cross. And I hope in time that the loyalists will see this too, for they are also victims.'

I shook my head. 'You oppose tyranny. Injustice. But these are symptoms, son. Their true cause is human weakness. Why do you think I keep trying to show you the error of your ways?'

'You have said much, yes. But you have *shown* me nothing.'

No, I thought, because you don't listen to the truth when it comes from my mouth, do you? You need to hear it from the very man you idolize. You need to hear it from Washington.

ii

In a timber cabin we found the leader, who had been attending to correspondence, and, passing through the guard at the entrance, we closed the door on the clamour of the camp, banishing the drill sergeant's orders, the constant clanking of implements from the kitchen, the trundle of carts.

He glanced up, smiling and nodding at Connor, feeling so utterly safe in his presence he was happy for the guards to remain outside, and giving me the benefit of a cooler, appraising stare before holding up a hand to return to his paperwork. He dipped his quill in his inkpot and, as we stood and patiently awaited our audience, signed something with a flourish. He returned the quill to the pot, blotted the document then stood and came out from behind the desk to greet us, Connor more warmly than me.

'What brings you here?' he said, and as the two friends embraced I found myself close to Washington's desk. Keeping my eyes on the two, I edged back a little and cast my eyes to the desktop, looking for something, anything, I could use as evidence in my testimony against him.

'The British have recalled their men in Philadelphia,' Connor was saying. 'They march for New York.'

Washington nodded gravely. Though the British had control of New York, the rebels still controlled sections of the city. New York remained pivotal to the war, and if the British could wrest control of it once and for all, they would gain a significant advantage.

'Very well,' said Washington, whose own foray across the Delaware to retake land in New Jersey had already been one of the major turning points of the war, 'I'll move forces to Monmouth. If we can rout them, we'll have finally turned the tide.' As they were speaking, I was trying to read the document Washington had just signed. I reached to adjust it slightly with my fingertips, so that I could

see it clearly. And then, with a silent, triumphant cheer, I picked it up and held it for them both to see.

'And what's this?'

Interrupted, Washington swung around and saw what I had in my hand. 'Private correspondence,' he bristled, and moved to snatch it back before I pulled it away and stepped out from behind the desk.

'I'm sure it is. Would you like to know what it says, Connor?'

Confusion and torn loyalties clouded his features. His mouth worked, but said nothing and his eyes darted from me to Washington as I continued: 'It seems your dear friend here has just ordered an *attack* on your village. Although "attack" might be putting it mildly. Tell him, Commander.'

Indignant, Washington responded, 'We've been receiving reports of Allied natives working with the British. I've asked my men to put a stop to it.'

'By burning their villages and salting the land. By calling for their extermination, according to this order.'

Now I had my chance to tell Connor the truth. 'And this is not the first time either.' I looked at Washington. Tell him what you did fourteen years ago.'

For a moment there was nothing but a tense silence in the cabin. From outside, the cling-clang of the kitchens, the gentle rattle of carts passing in and out of the camp, the stentorian bark of the drill sergeant, the rhythmic crunch of marching boots. While, inside, Washington's cheeks reddened as he looked at Connor and perhaps made some connections in his head, and realized exactly what it was that he had done all of those years ago. His mouth opened and closed as though he were finding it difficult to access the words.

'That was another time,' he blustered at last. Charles always liked to refer to Washington as an indecisive, stuttering fool and, here, for the first time, I knew exactly what he meant. 'The Seven Years War,' said Washington, as though that fact alone should explain everything.

I glanced at Connor, who had frozen, looking for all the world as though he were merely distracted, thinking about something else rather than paying attention to what was going on in the room, then reached for him. 'And so now you see, my son – what becomes of this "great man" under duress. He makes excuses. He displaces blame. He does a great many things, in fact – *except* take responsibility.'

The blood had drained from Washington's face. His eyes dropped, and he stared at the floor, his guilt clear for all to see.

I looked appealingly at Connor, who began to breathe heavily then exploded in anger, '*Enough!* Who did what and why must wait. My people must come first.'

I reached for him.

'No!' He recoiled. 'You and I are finished.'

'Son …' I started.

But he rounded on me. 'Do you think me so soft that calling me son might change my mind? How long did you sit on this information? Or am I to believe you only discovered it now? My mother's blood may stain another's hands, but Charles Lee is no less a monster, and all he does, he does by your command.' He turned to Washington, who reared back – afraid, all of a sudden, of Connor's rage.

'A warning to you both,' snarled Connor: 'choose to come after me or oppose me, and I will kill you.'

And he was gone.

16 September 1781
(Three Years Later)

i

At the Battle of Monmouth in ’78, Charles, despite having been ordered by Washington to attack the retreating British, pulled back.

What had been in his mind to do that, I couldn’t say. Perhaps he was outnumbered, which was the reason he gave, or perhaps he hoped that, by retreating, it would reflect badly on Washington and Congress, and he would at last be relieved of his command. For one reason or another, not least of which the fact that it didn’t really matter any more, I never asked him.

What I do know is that Washington had ordered him to attack; instead, he had done the opposite and the situation rapidly became a rout. I’m told that Connor had a hand in the ensuing battle, helped the rebels avoid defeat, while Charles, retreating, had run straight into Washington, words had been exchanged, and Charles in particular had used some rather choice language.

I could well imagine. I thought of the young man I’d first encountered all those years ago in Boston harbour, how he’d gazed up at me with such awe, yet looked down on everybody else with disdain. Ever since he had been passed over for commander-in-chief of the Continental army, his resentment towards Washington had, like an open wound, festered, growing worse, not healing. Not only had he talked ill of Washington on any available occasion, denigrating every aspect both of his personality and leadership, but he had embarked on a letter-writing campaign, attempting to win Congress members around to his side. True, his fervour was inspired partly by his loyalty to the Order, but it was also fuelled by his personal anger at having been overlooked. Charles might well have resigned his commission with the British Army and to all intents and purposes become an American citizen, but there was a very British sense of elitism to him and he felt keenly that the commander-in-chief position was rightfully his. I couldn’t blame him for bringing his personal feelings into it. Who among those knights who had first assembled at the Green Dragon tavern was innocent of it? Certainly not me. I’d hated Washington for what he’d done at

Ziio's village, but his leadership of the revolution, though sometimes ruthlessly clear-eyed, had not been tarred by brutality, so far as I knew. He had chalked up his fair share of success, and now that we were surely in the closing stages of the war, with independence just a declaration away, how could he possibly be thought of as anything but a military hero?

The last time I'd seen Connor was three years ago, when he left Washington and I alone together. Alone. Completely alone. And though older and slower and in near-constant pain from the wound at my side, I'd had the opportunity finally to exact revenge for what he'd done to Ziio; to 'relieve him of command' for good, but I'd spared him, because I was already beginning to wonder then if I was wrong about him. Perhaps it is time to admit that I was. It's a human failing to see the changes in yourself while assuming everybody else remains the same. Perhaps I had been guilty of that with Washington. Perhaps he had changed. I wonder, was Connor right about him?

Charles, meanwhile, was arrested for insubordination following the incident during which he swore at Washington, then court-martialled and finally relieved of duty, and he sought refuge at Fort George, where he has remained ever since.

ii

'The boy is on his way here,' said Charles.

I sat at my desk in my room in the West Tower of Fort George, in front of the window overlooking the ocean. Through my spyglass I'd seen ships on the horizon. Were they on their way here? Was Connor in one of them? Associates of his?

Turning in my seat, I waved Charles to sit down. He seemed swamped by his clothes; his face was gaunt and drawn and his greying hair hung over his face. He was fretful, and if Connor was coming then, in all honesty, he had every right to be.

'He's my son, Charles,' I said.

He nodded and looked away with pursed lips. 'I had wondered,' he said. 'There is a family resemblance. His mother is the Mohawk woman you absconded with, is she?'

'Oh, *absconded* with her, did I?'

He shrugged.

'Don't talk to me about neglecting the Order, Charles. You've done your fair share.'

There was a long silence and, when he looked back at me, his eyes had sparked to life. 'You once accused me of *creating* the Assassin,' he said sourly.

‘Does it not strike you as ironic – no, hypocritical – given that he is *your* offspring?’

‘Perhaps,’ I said. ‘I’m really not sure any more.’

He gave a dry laugh. ‘You stopped caring years ago, Haytham. I can’t remember the last time I saw anything but weakness in your eyes.’

‘Not weakness, Charles. Doubt.’

‘Doubt, then,’ he spat. ‘Doubt hardly befits a Templar Grand Master, don’t you think?’

‘Perhaps,’ I agreed. ‘Or perhaps I’ve learnt that only fools and children lack it.’

I turned to look out of the window. Before, the ships had been pinpricks to the naked eye, but now they were closer.

‘Poppycock,’ said Charles. ‘Assassin talk. *Belief* is a lack of doubt. That is all we ask of our leaders at least: belief.’

‘I remember a time you needed my sponsorship to join us; now, you would have my position. Would you have made a good Grand Master, do you think?’

‘Were you?’

There was a long pause. ‘That hurt, Charles.’

He stood. ‘I’m leaving. I have no desire to be here when the Assassin – *your son* – launches his attack.’ He looked at me. ‘And you should accompany me. At least we’ll have a head start on him.’

I shook my head. ‘I think not, Charles. I think I shall stay and make my final stand. Perhaps you’re right – perhaps I have not been the most effective Grand Master. Perhaps now is the time to put that right.’

‘You intend to face him? To fight him?’

I nodded.

‘What? You think you can talk him round? Bring him to our side?’

‘No,’ I said sadly. ‘I fear there is no turning Connor. Even knowing the truth about Washington has failed to alter his support. You’d like Connor, Charles, he has “belief”.’

‘So what, then?’

‘I won’t allow him to kill you, Charles,’ I said, and reached to my neck to remove the amulet. ‘Take this, please. I don’t want him having it, should he beat me in battle. We worked hard to take it from the Assassins; I’ve no desire to return it.’

But he snatched his hand away. ‘I won’t take it.’

‘You need to keep it safe.’

‘You’re quite capable of doing that yourself.’

‘I’m almost an old man, Charles. Let’s err on the side of caution, shall we?’

I pressed the amulet into his hands.

‘I’m detailing some guards to protect you,’ he said.

‘As you wish.’ I glanced at the window again. ‘You might want to hurry, though. I have a feeling the time of reckoning is near.’

He nodded and went to the door, where he turned. ‘You have been a good Grand Master, Haytham,’ he said, ‘and I’m sorry if you ever thought I felt otherwise.’

I smiled. ‘And I’m sorry for giving you cause to.’

He opened his mouth to speak, thought better of it, then turned and left.

iii

It struck me, when the bombardment began and I began to pray Charles had made his escape, that this might be my final journal entry; these words, my last. I hope that Connor, my own son, will read this journal, and perhaps, when he knows a little about my own journey through life, understand me, maybe even forgive me. My own path was paved with lies, my mistrust forged from treachery. But my own father never lied to me and, with this journal, I preserve that custom.

I present the truth, Connor, that you may do with it as you will.

Epilogue

16 September 1781

‘Father!’ I called. The bombardment was deafening, but I had fought my way through it to the West Tower where his quarters were to be found, and there in a passageway leading to the Grand Master’s chambers, I found him.

‘Connor,’ he replied. His eyes were flinty, unreadable. He held out his arm and engaged his hidden blade. I did the same. From outside came the thunder and crash of cannon fire, the rending of stone and the screams of dying men. Slowly, we walked towards one another. We’d fought side by side but never against one another. I wonder if, like me, he was curious.

With one hand behind his back, he presented his blade. I did the same.

‘On the next cannon blast,’ he said.

When it came, it seemed to shake the walls, but neither of us cared. The battle had begun and the sound of our chiming steel was piercing in the passageway, our grunts of effort clear and present. Everything else – the destruction of the fort around us – was background noise.

‘Come now,’ he taunted me, ‘you cannot hope to match me, Connor. For all your skill, you are still but a boy – with so much yet to learn.’

He showed me no quarter. No mercy. Whatever was in his heart and in his head, his blade flashed with its usual precision and ferocity. If he was now a warrior in his autumn years, beset by failing powers, then I would have hated to have faced him when he was in his prime. If a test is what he wanted to give me, then that is what I received.

‘Give me Lee,’ I demanded.

But Lee was long gone. There was just Father now, and he struck, as fast as a cobra, his blade coming within a hair’s breadth of opening my cheek. Turn defence into attack, I thought, and replied with a similar turn of speed, spinning around and catching his forearm, piercing it with my blade and destroying the fastening of his.

With a roar of pain he leapt back and I could see the worry cloud his eyes, but I let him recover, and watched as he tore a strip from his robe with which to bandage the wound.

‘But we have an opportunity here,’ I urged him. ‘Together we can break the cycle, and end this ancient war. I know it.’

I saw something in his eyes. Was it some spark of a long-abandoned desire, some unfulfilled dream remembered?

‘I know it,’ I repeated.

With the bloodied bandage between his teeth, he shook his head. Was he really that disillusioned? Had his heart hardened that much?

He finished tying the dressing. ‘No. You *want* to know it. You *want* it to be true.’ His words were tinged with sadness. ‘Part of me once did as well. But it is an impossible dream.’

‘We are in blood, you and I,’ I urged him. ‘Please …’

For a moment I thought I might have got through to him.

‘No, son. We are enemies. And one of us must die.’ From outside there came another volley of cannon fire. The torches quivered in their brackets, the light danced on the stone and dust particles rained from the walls.

So be it.

We fought. A long, hard battle. Not one that was always especially skilful. He came at me, with sword blade, fist and even at times his head. His fighting style was different to mine, something more rough-formed about it. It lacked the finesse of my own, yet was just as effective and, I soon learnt, just as painful.

We broke apart, both breathing hard. He wiped the back of his hand across his mouth then crouched, flexing the fingers of his injured forearm. ‘You act as though you have some right to judge,’ he said, ‘To declare me and mine wrong for the world. And yet everything I’ve shown you – all I’ve said and done – should clearly demonstrate otherwise. But we didn’t harm your people. We didn’t support the Crown. We worked to see this land united and at peace. Under our rule all would be equal. Do the patriots promise the same?’

‘They offer freedom,’ I said, watching him carefully, remembering something Achilles once taught me: that every word, every gesture, is combat.

‘Freedom?’ he scoffed. ‘I’ve told you – time and time again – it’s dangerous. There will never be a consensus, son, among those you have helped to ascend. They will differ in their views of what it means to be free. The peace you so desperately seek does not exist.’

I shook my head. ‘No. Together they will forge something new – better than what came before.’

‘These men are united now by a common cause,’ he continued, sweeping his bad arm around to indicate … *us*, I suppose. The revolution. ‘But when this battle is finished they will fall to fighting among themselves about how best to ensure control. In time, it will lead to war. You’ll see.’

And then he leapt forward, striking down with the sword, aiming not for my body but my blade arm. I deflected, but he was quick, span and struck me backhanded with his sword hilt above the eye. My vision clouded and I staggered back, defending wildly as he tried to press home his advantage. By sheer dumb luck I hit his injured arm, gaining a howl of agony and a temporary lull as we both recovered.

Another cannon boom. More dust dislodged from the walls, and I felt the floor shake. Blood coursed from the wound above my eye, and I wiped it away with the back of my hand.

'The patriot leaders do not seek to control,' I assured him. 'There will be no monarch here. The people will have the power – as they should.'

He shook his head slowly and sadly, a condescending gesture that, if it was supposed to appease me, had exactly the reverse effect. 'The people never have the power,' he said wearily, 'only the illusion of it. And here's the real secret: they don't want it. The responsibility is too great to bear. It's why they're so quick to fall in line as soon as someone takes charge. They *want* to be told what to do. They *yearn* for it. Little wonder, that, since all mankind was built to serve.'

Again we traded blows. Both of us had drawn blood. Looking at him, did I see an older mirror-image of myself? Having read his journal, I can look back now and know exactly how he saw me: as the man he should have been. How would things have been different if I'd known then what I know now?

I don't know is the answer to that question. I still don't know.

'So because we are inclined by nature to be controlled, who better than the Templars?' I shook my head. 'It is a poor offer.'

'It is truth,' exclaimed Haytham. 'Principle and practice are two very different beasts. I see the world the way it is – not as I wish it would be.'

I attacked and he defended, and for a few moments the passageway rang to the sound of clashing steel. Both of us were tired now; the battle no longer had the urgency it had once had. For a moment I wondered if it might simply peter out; if there was any way that the two of us would simply turn, walk away and go in our separate directions. But no. There had to be an end to this now. I knew it. I could see in his eyes that he knew it too. This had to end here.

'No, Father … you have given up – and you would have us all do the same.'

And then there was the thump and shudder of a cannonball strike nearby and stone was cascading from the walls. It was near. So near. It had to be followed by another. And it was. All of a sudden a gaping hole was blown in the passageway.

I was thrown back by the blast and landed in a painful heap, like a drunk sliding slowly down the wall of a tavern, my head and shoulders at a strange angle to the rest of me. The corridor was full of dust and settling debris as the boom of the explosion slowly ebbed away into the rattle and clatter of shifting rubble. I pulled myself painfully to my feet and squinted through clouds of dust to see him lying like I had been, but on the other side of the hole in the wall made by the cannonball, and limped over to him. I paused and glanced through the hole, to be greeted by the disorientating sight of the Grand Master's chamber with its back wall blown out, the jagged stone framing a view of the ocean. There were four ships on the water, all with trails of smoke rising from their cannons on deck and, as I watched, there was a boom as another was fired.

I passed by and stooped to Father, who looked up at me and shifted a little. His hand crept towards his sword, which was just out of his reach, and I kicked it skittering away over the stone. Grimacing with the pain, I leaned towards him.

'Surrender, and I will spare you,' I said.

I felt the breeze on my skin, the passageway suddenly flooded with natural light. He looked so old, his face battered and bruised. Even so, he smiled, 'Brave words from a man about to die.'

'You fare no better,' I replied.

'Ah,' he smiled, showing bloodied teeth, 'but I am not alone …' and I turned to see two of the fort's guards come rushing along the corridor, raising their muskets and stopping just short of us. My eyes went from them to my father, who was pulling himself to his feet, holding up a restraining hand to his men, the only thing stopping them from killing me.

Bracing himself against the wall, he coughed and spat then looked up at me. 'Even when your kind appears to triumph … still we rise again. Do you know why?'

I shook my head.

'It is because the Order is born of a realization. We require no creed. No indoctrination by desperate old men. All we need is that the world be as it is. This is why the Templars can never be destroyed.'

And now, of course, I wonder, would he have done it? Would he have let them kill me?

But I'll never have my answer. For suddenly there was the crackle of gunfire and the men span and dropped, taken out by sniper fire from the other side of the wall. And in the next moment I had rushed forward and, before he could react,

knocked Haytham back to the stone and stood over him once again, my blade hand pulled back.

And then, with a great rush of something that might have been futility, and a sound that I realized was my own sob, I stabbed him in his heart.

His body jerked as it accepted my blade, then relaxed, and as I withdrew it he was smiling. ‘Don’t think I have any intention of caressing your cheek and saying I was wrong,’ he said softly as I watched the life ebb out of him. ‘I will not weep and wonder what might have been. I’m sure you understand.’

I was kneeling now, and reached to hold him. What I felt was … nothing. A numbness. A great weariness that it had all come to this.

‘Still,’ he said, as his eyelids fluttered and the blood seemed to drain from his face, ‘I’m proud of you in a way. You have shown conviction. Strength. Courage. These are noble traits.’

With a sardonic smile he added, ‘I should have killed you long ago.’

And then he died.

I looked for the amulet Mother had told me about, but it was gone. I closed Father’s eyes, stood and walked away.

2 October 1782

At last, on a freezing night at the frontier, I found him in the Conestoga Inn, where I entered to find him sitting in the shadows, his shoulders hunched forward and a bottle close at hand. Older and unkempt, with wiry, untamed hair and no trace of the army officer he had once been, but definitely him: Charles Lee.

As I approached the table he looked up at me, and at first I was taken aback by the wildness of his red-rimmed eyes. Any madness was either suppressed or hidden, though, and he showed no emotion on seeing me, apart from a look which I suppose was relief. For over a month I had chased him.

Wordlessly, he offered me a drink from the bottle, and I nodded, took a sip and passed the bottle back to him. Then we sat together for a long time, watching the other patrons of the tavern, listening to their chatter, games and laughter which carried on around us.

In the end, he looked at me, and though he said nothing, his eyes did it for him, and so I silently ejected my blade and, when he closed them, slid it into him, under the rib, straight into the heart. He died without a sound and I rested him on the tabletop, as though he had simply passed out from too much drink. Then I reached, took the amulet from his neck and put it around my own.

Looking down at it, it glowed softly for a moment. I pushed it underneath my shirt, stood and left.

15 November 1783

i

Holding the reins of my horse, I walked through my village with a mounting sense of disbelief. As I'd arrived, I'd seen well-tended fields but the village itself was deserted, the longhouse abandoned, the cook fires cold, and the only soul in sight was a grizzled hunter – a white hunter, not a Mohawk – who sat on an upturned pail in front of a fire, roasting something that smelled good on a spit.

He looked at me carefully as I approached, and his eyes went to his musket, which lay nearby, but I waved to say I meant no harm.

He nodded. 'If you're hungry, I've got extra,' he said genially.

And it did smell good, but I had other things on my mind. 'Do you know what happened here? Where is everyone?'

'Gone west. Been a few weeks since they left. Seems some fella from New York was granted the land by Congress. Guess they decided they didn't need approval from those that lived here to settle.'

'What?' I said.

'Yup. Seein' it happen more and more. Natives pushed out by traders and ranchers lookin' to expand. Government *says* they don't take land that's already owned, but, uh … Here you can see otherwise.'

'How could this happen?' I asked, turning around slowly, seeing only emptiness where once I had seen the familiar faces of my people – the people I had grown up with.

'We're on our own now,' he continued. 'No jolly old English parts and labour. Which means we gotta go at it ourselves. Gotta pay for it too. Sellin' land is quick and easy. And not quite so nasty as taxes. And since some say taxes is what started the whole war, ain't no rush to bring 'em back.' He gave a full, throaty laugh. 'Clever men, these new leaders of ours. They know not to push it just yet. Too soon. Too … British.' He stared into his fire. 'But it will come. Always does.'

I thanked him and left him, to go to the longhouse, thinking, as I walked: I have failed. My people were gone – chased away by those I thought would

protect them.

As I walked, the amulet around my neck glowed, and I took it, held it in my palm and studied it. Perhaps there was one last thing I could do, and that was to save this place from them all, patriots and Templars alike.

ii

In a clearing in the forest I crouched and regarded what I held in my hands: my mother's necklace in one, my father's amulet in the other.

To myself I said, 'Mother. Father. I am sorry. I have failed you both. I made a promise to protect our people, Mother. I thought if I could stop the Templars, if I could keep the revolution free from their influence, then those I supported would do what was right. They did, I suppose, do what was right – what was right for them. As for you, Father, I thought I might unite us, that we would forget the past and forge a better future. In time, I believed you could be made to see the world as I do – to understand. But it was just a dream. This, too, I should have known. Were we not meant to live in peace, then? Is that it? Are we born to argue? To fight? So many voices – each demanding something else.

'It has been hard at times, but never harder than today. To see all I worked for perverted, discarded, forgotten. You would say I have described the whole of history, Father. Are you smiling, then? Hoping I might speak the words you longed to hear? To validate you? To say that all along you were right? I will not. Even now, faced as I am with the truth of your cold words, I refuse. Because I believe things can still change.

'I may never succeed. The Assassins may struggle another thousand years in vain. But we will not stop.'

I began to dig.

'Compromise. That's what everyone has insisted on. And so I have learnt it. But differently than most, I think. I realize now that it will take time, that the road ahead is long and shrouded in darkness. It is a road that will not always take me where I wish to go – and I doubt I will live to see it end. But I will travel down it nonetheless.'

I dug and dug until the hole was deep enough, deeper than that which was needed to bury a body, enough for me to climb into.

'For at my side walks hope. In the face of all that insists I turn back, I carry on: this, this is my compromise.'

I dropped the amulet into the hole and then, as the sun began to go down, I shovelled dirt on top of it until it was hidden and then I turned and left.

Full of hope for the future, I returned to my people, to the Assassins.

It was time for new blood.

List of Characters

As’ad Pasha al-Azm: Ottoman governor of Damascus, unknown–1758
Jeffrey Amherst: British commander, 1717–97
Tom Barrett: boy who lives next door to Haytham in Queen Anne’s Square
Reginald Birch, senior property manager for Edward Kenway and a Templar
Edward Braddock, the Bulldog: British General and commander-in-chief of the colonies, 1695–1755
Benjamin Church: doctor; Templar
Connor: Assassin
Cutter: torturer
Betty: servant in the Kenway household
Miss Davy: Mrs Kenway’s lady’s maid
Mr Geoffrey Digweed: Mr Kenway’s gentleman
Edith: Haytham’s nursemaid
Emily: chambermaid in the Kenway household
James Fairweather, acquaintance of Haytham’s
Old Mr Fayling: Haytham’s tutor
John Harrison: Templar
Thomas Hickey: Templar
Jim Holden: private in the British Army
William Johnson: Templar
Kaniehtí:io, Mohawk woman, also known as Ziio; Connor’s mother
Edward Kenway: Haytham’s father
Haytham E. Kenway
Jenny Kenway: Haytham’s half-sister
Tessa Kenway, nee Stephenson-Oakley: Haytham’s mother
Catherine Kerr and Cornelius Douglass: owners of the Green Dragon
Charles Lee: Templar

Grand Vizier Raghib Pasha, the most senior minister of the Sultan
John Pitcairn: Templar
Mrs Searle: servant in the Kenway household
Mr Simpkin: on the staff of Edward Kenway
Slater: executioner and Braddock's lieutenant
Tessa Stephenson-Oakley: Haytham's mother
Silas Thatcher: slaver and commander in the King's Troop, in charge of the Southgate Fort
Twitch: informer
Juan Vedomir: traitor to the Templars
George Washington: aide to General Braddock; commander-in-chief of the newly formed Continental Army; Founding Father and future President, 1732–99

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Etienne Allonier
Anouk Bachman
Alex Clarke
Hana Osman
Andrew Holmes
Virginie Sergent
Clémence Deleuze

Oliver Bowden

ASSASSIN'S CREED®

Black Flag

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Part One

1

1719 (or thereabouts)

I cut off a man's nose once.

I don't recall exactly when it was: 1719 or thereabouts. Nor where. But it happened during a raid on a Spanish brig. We wanted her supplies, of course. I pride myself on keeping the *Jackdaw* well stocked. But there was something else on board, too. Something we didn't have but needed. *Someone*, to be precise. A ship's cook.

Our own ship's cook and his mate were both dead. Cook's mate had been caught pissing in the ballast, which I didn't allow so punished the traditional way, by making him drink a mug of the crew's piss. I must admit, I've never had it happen before where the mug of punishment piss actually killed the man, but that's what happened with the cook's mate. He drank the mug of piss, went to sleep that night and never got up. Cook was all right by himself for a time, but he did like a nip of rum, and after a nip of rum was apt to take the night air on the poop deck. I'd hear him clomping about on the roof of my cabin, dancing a jig. Until one night I heard him clomping about on the roof of my cabin and dancing a jig – followed by a scream and a splash.

The bell rang and the crew rushed to the deck where we dropped anchor and lit lanterns and torches, but of cook there was no sign.

They had lads working with them, of course, but they were just boys, none of them knew how do anything more culinary-minded than stir the pot or peel some spuds, and we'd been living on raw grub ever since. Not a man among us knew how to do so much as boil a pot of water.

Now, not long back we'd taken a man-of-war. A tasty little excursion from which we'd bagged ourselves a brand spanking new broadside battery and a hold full of artillery: cutlasses, pikes, muskets, pistols, powder and shot. From one of the captured crew, who then became one of *my* crew, I'd learnt that the Dons had a particular supply ship on which served an especially adept cook. Word was that he'd cooked at court but offended the queen and been banished. I didn't believe a word of that but it didn't stop me repeating it, telling the crew we'd have him

preparing our meals before the week was out. Sure enough we made it our business to hunt down this particular brig, and when we found it, lost no time in attacking it.

Our new broadside battery came in handy. We drew up alongside and peppered the brig with shot till she broke, the canvas in tatters and the helm splintered in the water.

She was already listing as my crew lashed and boarded her, scuttling over her sides like rats, the air heavy with the stink of powder, the sound of muskets popping and cutlasses already beginning to rattle. I was in among them as always, cutlass in one hand and my hidden blade engaged, the cutlass for melee work, the blade for close finishing. Two of them came at me and I made short of the first, driving my cutlass into the top of his head and slicing his tricorne in half as the blade cleaved his head almost in two. He went to his knees with the blade of my sword between his eyes but the problem was I'd driven it in too deep, and when I tried to wrench it free his writhing body came with it. Now the second man was upon me, terror in his eyes, not used to fighting, obviously, and with a flick of the blade I sliced off his nose, which had the desired effect of sending him back with blood spraying from the hole where his beak had been, while I used two hands to finally wrench my cutlass out of the skull of the first attacker and continue the good fight. It was soon over, with as few of their crew dead as possible, me having given out special instructions that on no account was the cook to be harmed – *whatever happened, I'd said, we had to take the cook alive*.

And as their brig disappeared beneath the water and we sailed away, leaving a fog of powder smoke and a sea of splintered hull and bobbing bits of broken ship behind us, we gathered their crew on the main deck to flush out the cook, hardly a man among us not salivating, his belly not rumbling, the well-fed look of their crew not lost on us. Not at all.

It was Caroline who taught me how to appreciate good food. Caroline, my one true love. In the all-too brief time we'd spent together she'd refined my palate, and I liked to think that she'd have approved of my policy towards the repast, and how I'd passed on a love of the finer things to the crew, knowing as I did, partly due to what she'd shown me, that a well-fed man is a happy man, and a happy man is a man less prone to questioning the authority of the ship, which is why in all those years at sea I never had one sniff of mutiny. Not one.

'Here I am,' he said, stepping forward. Except it sounded more like, 'Beer I bam,' owing to his bandaged face, where some fool had cut off his nose.

2

1711

But, anyway, where was I? *Caroline*. You wanted to know how I met her.

Well, therein lies a tale, as they say. Therein lies a tale. For that I need to go much further back, to a time when I was just a simple sheep farmer, before I knew anything of Assassins or Templars, of Blackbeard, Benjamin Hornigold, of Nassau or the Observatory, and might never have been any the wiser but for a chance meeting at the Auld Shillelagh one hot summer's day back in 1711.

The thing is, I was one of those young firebrands who liked a drink, even though it got me into a few scrapes. Quite a few … *incidents*, shall we say, of which I'm none too proud. But that's the cross you have to bear if you're a little over-fond of the booze; it's rare to find a drinker with a clean conscience. Most of us will have considered knocking it on the head at one time or another, reforming our lives and perhaps turning to God or trying to make something of ourselves. But then noon comes around and you know what's good for that head is another drink, and so you head for the tavern.

The taverns I'm referring to were in Bristol, on the south-west coast of dear old England, where we were accustomed to fierce winters and glorious summers, and that year, that particular year, the year that I first met her, 1711, like I say, I was just seventeen years old.

And, yes – yes I was drunk when it happened. In those days, you'd have to say I was drunk a lot of the time. Perhaps … well, let's not exaggerate, I don't want to give a bad account of myself. But perhaps half of the time. Maybe a bit more.

Home was on the outskirts of a village called Hatherton, seven miles outside Bristol, where we ran a smallholding keeping sheep. Father's interests lay with the livestock. They always had, so having me on board had freed him from the aspect of the business he most despised, which was making the trips into town with the merchandise, haggling with merchants and traders, bargaining, cutting deals. As soon as I'd come of age, by which I mean, as soon as I was enough of

a man to meet the eye of our business associates and trade as an equal, well, that's what I did. And father was all too glad to let me do it.

My father's name was Bernard. My mother, Linette. They hailed from Swansea but had found their way to the West Country when I was ten years old. We still had the Welsh accent. I don't suppose I minded much that it marked us out as different. I was a sheep farmer, not one of the sheep.

Father and Mother used to say I had the gift of the gab, and Mother in particular used to tell me I was a good-looking young man, and that I could charm the birds off the trees, and it's true, even though I do say so myself, I did have a certain way with the ladies. Let's put it this way, dealing with the wives of the merchants was a more successful hunting ground than having to barter with their husbands.

How I spent my days would depend on the season. January to May, that was lambing season, our busiest time, when I'd find myself in the barns by sun-up, sore head or not, needing to see whether any ewes had lambed during the night. If they had, then they were taken into one of the smaller barns and put into pens, lambing jugs we called them, where father would take over, while I was cleaning feeders, filling them up again, changing the hay and water, and mother would be assiduously recording details of the new births in a journal. Me, I didn't have my letters then. I do now, of course, Caroline taught me them, along with much else that made me a man, but not back then, so that duty fell to Mother, whose own letters weren't much better, but enough to at least keep a record.

They loved working together, Mother and Father. Even more reason why Father liked me going into town. He and my mother – it was as though they were joined at the hip. I had never seen another two people so much in love and who had so little need to make a display of the fact. It was plain to witness that they kept each other going. It was good for the soul to see.

In the autumn we'd bring the rams through to the pasture to graze with the ewes, so that they could get on with the business of producing more lambs for the following spring. Fields needed tending to, fences and walls building and repairing.

In winter, if the weather was very bad, we brought the sheep into the barns, kept them safe and warm, ready for January when lambing season began.

But it was during summer when I really came into my own. Shearing season. Mother and Father carried out the bulk of it while I made more frequent trips into town, not with carcasses for meat, but with my cart laden with wool. And in the summer, with even more opportunity to do so, I found myself frequenting the local taverns more and more. You could say I became a familiar sight in the taverns, in fact, in my long buttoned-up waistcoat, knee breeches, white

stockings and the slightly battered brown tricorne that I liked to think of as my trademark, because my mother said it went well with my hair (which was permanently in need of a cut, but quite a striking sandy colour, if I do say so myself).

It was in the taverns I discovered that my gift of the gab was improved after a few ales at noon. The booze, it has that effect, doesn't it? Loosens tongues, inhibitions, morals … Not that I was exactly shy and retiring when I was sober, but the ale, it gave me that extra edge. And after all, the money from extra sales made as a result of my ale-inspired salesmanship more than covered the cost of the ale in the first place. Or at least that's what I told myself at the time.

And there was something else, too, apart from the foolish notion that Edward in his cups was a better salesman than Edward sober, and that was my state of mind.

Because the truth was, I thought I was different. No, I *knew* I was different. There were times I'd sit by myself at night and know I was seeing the world in a way that was all my own. I know what it is now but I couldn't put it into words back then, other than to say I felt different.

And either because of that or despite it I'd decided I didn't want to be a sheep farmer all my life. I knew it the first day, when I set foot on the farm as an employee, and not as a child, and I saw myself, and then looked at my father, and understood that I was no longer here to play and would soon go home to dream about a future setting sail on the high seas. No, this *was* my future, and I would spend the rest of my life as a sheep farmer, working for my father, marrying a local girl, siring boys and teaching them to become sheep farmers, just like their father, just like their grandfather. I saw the rest of my life laid out for me, like neat workclothes on a bed, and rather than feel a warm surge of contentment and happiness about that fact, it terrified me.

So the truth was, and there's no way of putting it more gently, and I'm sorry, Father, God rest your soul, but I hated my job. And after a few ales, well, I hated it less, is all I can say. Was I blotting out my dashed dreams with the booze? Probably. I never really thought about it at the time. All I knew was that sitting on my shoulder, perched there like a mangy cat, was a festering resentment at the way my life was turning out – or, worse, actually had turned out.

Perhaps I was a little indiscreet concerning some of my true feelings. I might on occasion have given my fellow drinkers the impression that I felt life had better things in store for me. What can I say? I was young and arrogant and a pisshead. A lethal combination at the best of times. And these were definitely not the best of times.

'You think you're above the likes of us, do you?'

I heard that a lot. Or variations of it, at least.

And perhaps it would have been more diplomatic of me to answer in the negative, but I didn't, and so I found myself in more than my fair share of fights. Perhaps it was to prove that I was better than them in all things, fighting included. Perhaps because in my own way I was upholding the family name. A drinker I might have been. A philanderer. Arrogant. Unreliable. But not a coward. Oh no. Never one to shrink from a fight.

And it was during the summertime when my recklessness reached its height; when I would be most drunk and most boisterous, and mainly a bit of a pain in the arse. But on the other hand, all the more likely to help a young lady in distress.

3

She was in the Auld Shillelagh, a tavern halfway between Hatherton and Bristol, which was a regular haunt of mine, and sometimes in the summer when Mother and Father toiled over the shearing at home, when I'd make more regular trips into town, regular to the tune of several times a day.

I admit I hadn't taken much notice of her at first, which was unusual for me, because I liked to pride myself on knowing the exact location of any pretty woman nearabouts, and besides, the Shillelagh wasn't the sort of place you expected to find a pretty woman. A *woman*, yes. A certain type of woman. But this girl I could see wasn't like that: she was young, about my age, and she wore a white linen coif and a smock. Looked to me like a domestic.

But it wasn't her clothes that drew my attention. It was the loudness of her voice, which you'd have to say was in complete contrast to the way she looked. She was sitting with three men, all of them older than her, who I recognized at once: Tom Cobleigh, his brother Seth and Julian somebody, whose surname escaped me, but who worked with them – three men with whom I had traded words if not blows before. The kind who looked down their noses at me because they thought I looked down my nose at them, who liked me no more than I liked them, which was not a lot. They were sat forward on their stools and watching this young girl with leering, wolfish eyes that betrayed a darker purpose, even though they were all smiles, thumping on the table, encouraging her as she drank dry a flagon of ale.

No, she did not look like one of the women who usually frequented the tavern, but it seemed she was determined to act like one of them. The flagon was about as big as she was, and as she wiped her hand across her mouth and hammered it to the table, the men responded with cheers, shouting for another one and no doubt pleased to see her wobble slightly on her stool. Probably couldn't believe their luck. Pretty little thing like that.

I watched as they let the girl drink yet more ale with the same tumult accompanying her success, and then as she did the same as before, and wiped her hand across her mouth but with an even more pronounced wobble this time, a look passed between them. A look that seemed to say, *The Job Is Done*.

Tom and Julian stood, and they began, in their words, to ‘escort’ her to the door, because, ‘You’ve had too much to drink, my lovely, let’s get you home, shall we?’

‘To bed,’ smirked Seth, thinking he was saying it under his breath even though the whole tavern heard him. ‘Let’s be getting you to bed.’

I passed a look to the barman, who dropped his eyes and used his apron to blow his nose. A customer sat down the bar from me turned away. Bastards. Might as well have looked to the cat for help, I thought, then with a sigh banged down my tankard, stepped off my stool and followed the Cobleighs into the road outside.

I blinked as I stepped from the darkness of the tavern into bright sunlight. My cart was there, roasting in the sun; beside it another one that I took to belong to the Cobleighs. On the other side of the road was a yard with the house set far back, but no sign of a farmer. We were alone on the highway: just me, the two Cobleigh brothers, Julian and the girl, of course.

‘Well, Tom Cobleigh,’ I said, ‘the things you see on a fine afternoon. Things like you and your cronies getting drunk and getting a poor defenceless young woman even drunker.’

The girl sagged as Tom Cobleigh let go of her arm and turned to address me, his finger already raised.

‘Now just you stay out of this, Edward Kenway, you young good-for-nothing. You’re as drunk as I am and yer morals just as loose; I don’t need to be given a talking-to by the likes of you.’

Seth and Julian had turned as well. The girl was glazed over, like her mind had gone to sleep even if her body was still awake.

‘Well,’ I smiled, ‘loose morals I might have, Tom Cobleigh, but I don’t need to pour ale down a girl’s throat before taking her to bed, and I certainly don’t need two friends to help me at the task.’

Tom Cobleigh reddened. ‘Why, you cheeky little bastard, you, I’m going to put her on my cart is what I’m going to do, and take her home.’

‘I have no doubt that you intend to put her on your cart and take her home. It’s what you plan to do between putting her on the cart and reaching home that concerns me.’

‘That *concerns* you, does it? A broken nose and a couple of broken ribs will be concerning you unless you mind your own bloody business.’

Squinting, I glanced at the highway, where the trees bordering the dirt track shone gold and green in the sun, and in the distance was a lone figure on a horse, shimmering and indistinct.

I took a step forward, and if there had been any warmth or humour in my manner, then it disappeared now, almost of its own accord. There was a steeliness in my voice when I next spoke.

'Now you just leave that girl alone, Tom Cobleigh, or I won't be responsible for my actions.'

The three men looked at one another. In a way they'd done as I asked. They'd let go of the girl, and she seemed almost relieved to slide to her haunches, placing one hand on the ground and looking at us all with bleary eyes, evidently oblivious to all this being discussed on her behalf.

Meanwhile I looked at the Cobleighs and weighed up the odds. Had I ever fought three at once? Well, no. Because if you were fighting three at once then you weren't so much fighting as getting beaten up. But come on, Edward Kenway, I told myself. Yes, on the one hand, it was three men, but one of them was Tom Cobleigh, who was no spring chicken, but about my father's age. Another one was Seth Cobleigh, who was Tom Cobleigh's son. And if you can imagine the kind of person who would help his father get a young girl drunk, well, then you can imagine the sort of person Seth Cobleigh was, which was to say a maggoty, underhand type, more likely to run away from a fight with wet breeches than stand his ground. And what's more, they were drunk.

On the other hand, I was drunk, too. Plus they had Julian who, going on looks alone, could handle himself.

But I had another idea. That lone rider I could see in the distance. If I could just hold off the Cobleighs till he arrived, the odds were likely to shift back in my favour. After all, if he was of good character, the lone rider was bound to stop and help me out.

'Well, Tom Cobleigh,' I said, 'you got the advantage over me, that's obvious for anyone to see, but, you know, I just wouldn't be able to look my mother in the eye knowing I'd let you and your cronies abduct this pretty young thing.'

I glanced up the road, to where that lone rider was getting closer. *Come on then,* I thought. *Don't hang about.*

'So,' I continued, 'even if you end up leaving me in a bloody heap by the side of this here road, and carry that young lassie off anyway, I'm going to have to do all that I can to make it as difficult for you as possible. And perhaps see to it that you go on your way with a black eye and maybe a pair of throbbing bollocks for your troubles.'

Tom Cobleigh spat then peered at me through wizened, slitty eyes. 'That's it then, is it? Well, are you just going to stand there talking about it all day, or are you going to attend to your task? Because time waits for no man …' He grinned an evil grin. 'I've got things to see, people to do.'

‘Aye, that’s right, and the longer you leave it the more chance that poor lassie has of sobering up, eh?’

‘I don’t mind telling you, I’m getting tired of all this talk, Kenway.’ He turned to Julian. ‘How about we teach this little bastard a lesson? Oh, and one more thing before we start, Master Kenway, you ain’t fit to shine your mother’s shoes, you understand?’

That hit me hard, I don’t mind admitting. Having someone like Tom Cobleigh, who had all the morals of a frothing dog and about half the intelligence, able to reach into my soul as if my guilt was an open wound, then stick his thumb in that open wound and cause me even more pain, well, it certainly firmed up my resolve, if nothing else.

Julian pushed his chest forward and with a snarl advanced. Two steps away from me he raised his fists, dipped his right shoulder and swung, and I don’t know who Julian was used to fighting outside taverns, but somebody with less experience than me, that’s for sure, because I’d already taken note of the fact that he was right-handed, and he couldn’t have made his intentions more obvious if he’d tried.

The dirt rose in clouds around my feet as I dodged easily and brought my own right fist up sharply. He shouted in pain as I caught him under the jaw. And if it had just been him, the battle would have been won. But Tom Cobleigh was already upon me. From the corner of my eye I saw him but was too late to react and, next thing you know, I was dazed by knuckles that slammed into my temple.

I staggered slightly as I swung to meet the attack, and my fists were swinging much more wildly than I’d have liked. I was hoping to land a lucky blow, needing to put at least one of the men down to even up the numbers. But none of my punches made contact as Tom Cobleigh retreated, plus Julian had recovered from my first strike with alarming speed and now came at me again.

His right fist came up and connected with my chin, spinning me about so that I almost lost my balance. My hat flew off, my hair was in my eyes and I was in disarray. And guess who came in with his boots kicking? That worm, Seth Cobleigh, shouting encouragement to his father and Julian at the same time. And the little bastard was lucky. His boot caught me in the midriff and, already off balance, I lost my footing. And fell.

The worst thing you can do in a fight is fall. Once you fall it’s over. Through their legs I saw the lone rider up the highway, who was now my only chance at salvation, possibly my only hope of getting out of this alive. But what I saw made my heart sink. Not a man on a horse, a tradesman, who would dismount and come rushing to my aid. No, the lone rider was a woman. She was riding

astride the horse, not side-saddle, but despite that you could see she was a lady. She wore a bonnet and a light-coloured summer dress, and the last thing I thought before the Cobleigh boots obscured my view and the kicks came raining in was that she was beautiful.

So what, though? Good looks weren't going to save me now.

'Hey,' I heard. 'You three men. Stop what you're doing right now.'

They turned to look up at her and removed their hats, shuffling in line to hide the sight of me, who lay coughing on the ground.

'What is going on here?' she demanded to know. From the sound of her voice I could tell she was young and, while not highly born, definitely well-bred – too well-bred surely to be riding unaccompanied?

'We were just teaching this young man here some manners,' rasped Tom Cobleigh, out of breath. Exhausting business it was, kicking me half to death.

'Well, it doesn't take three of you to do that, does it?' she replied. I could see her now, twice as beautiful as I'd first thought, as she glowered at the Cobleighs, who for their part looked thoroughly mortified.

She dismounted. 'More to the point, what are you doing with this young lady here?' She indicated the girl, who still sat dazed and drunk on the ground.

'Oh, ma'am, begging your pardon, ma'am, but this is a young friend of ours who has had too much to drink.'

The lady darkened. 'She is most certainly *not* your young friend, she is a maidservant, and if I don't get her back home before my mother discovers she's absconded then she will be an unemployed maidservant.'

She looked pointedly from one man to the next. 'I know you men, and I think I understand exactly what has been going on here. Now you will leave this young man alone and be on your way before I am of a mind to take this further.'

With much bowing and scraping, the Cobleighs clambered aboard their cart and were soon gone. Meanwhile the woman dismounted and knelt down to speak to me. Her voice had changed. She was softly spoken now. I heard concern. 'My name is Caroline Scott. My family lives on Hawkins Lane in Bristol; let me take you back there and tend to your wounds.'

'I cannot, my lady,' I said, sitting up and trying to manage a grin. 'I have work to do.'

She stood, frowning. 'I see. And did I assess the situation correctly?'

I picked up my hat and began to brush the dirt from it. It was even more battered now. 'You did, my lady.'

'Then I owe you my thanks and so will Rose when she sobers up. She's a wilful girl, not always the easiest of staff, but, nevertheless, I don't want to see her suffer for her impetuousness.'

She was an angel, I decided then, and as I helped them mount the horse, Caroline holding on to Rose, who lolled drunkenly over the neck of the horse, I had a sudden thought.

‘Can I see you again, my lady? To thank you properly when I look a little more presentable, perhaps?’

She gave me a regretful look. ‘I fear my father would not approve,’ she said, and with that shook the reins and left.

That night I sat beneath the thatch of our cottage, gazing out over the pastures that rolled away from the farm as the sun went down. Usually my thoughts would be of escaping my future.

That night I thought of Caroline. Caroline Scott of Hawkins Lane.

4

Two days later I woke up to the sound of screaming. In a rush I dragged my breeches on and hopped out of the room with my shirt unbuttoned, still pulling my boots on over bare feet. I knew that scream. It was my mother. Moments later her screams had died down to a sob, replaced by my father cursing. The soft cursing of a man who had been proved correct.

After my fight at the Auld Shillelagh I had returned to the tavern in order to do something about my cuts and bruises. To numb the pain, so to speak. And what better way of doing that than with a drink or two? Thus, when I'd eventually arrived home I'd been in a bit of a state. And when I say 'state', I mean 'state', as in a man who looked as though he'd been in the wars, which I had: bruises to my face, my neck, my clothes ragged and torn. But also 'state', as in a man who had had far too much to drink.

Either one of these two things were likely to make Father angry, so we'd argued, and I'm ashamed to say I used some choice language in front of my mother. And of course Father was furious about that, and I felt the back of his hand for it. But what had really enraged him was that the brawl, as he called it (because he wouldn't accept that I'd been protecting a lady's honour, and that he would have done the same in my position) had all taken place during the working day. What he saw was them, exhausted from their labours, and me, getting drunk and into fights, sullying the good name of the Kenways, and in this particular case storing up even more trouble for the future.

'The Cobleighs.' He'd thrown up his hands in exasperation. 'That lot of bad bloody eggs,' he'd said. 'It would have to be them, wouldn't it? They won't let it go, you know that, don't you?'

Sure enough, I rushed out to the front yard that morning, and there was Father, in his workclothes, comforting Mother, who stood with her head buried in his chest, sobbing quietly, her back to what was on the ground.

My hand went to my mouth, seeing what had greeted them: two slaughtered sheep, their throats cut, laid side by side in the blood-darkened dust. They'd been placed there so we'd know they weren't the victims of a fox or wild dog. So that we'd know the sheep had been killed for a reason.

A warning. Vengeance.

‘The Cobleighs,’ I spat, feeling rage bubble like fast-boiling water within me. With it came a sharp, stinging guilt. We all knew it was my actions that had caused this.

Father didn’t look at me. On his face was all the sadness and worry you’d expect. Like I say, he was a well-respected man, and he enjoyed the benefits of that respect; his relations even with his competitors were conducted with courtesy and respect. He didn’t like the Cobleighs, of course he didn’t – who did? – but he’d never had trouble before, either with them or anyone else. This was the first time. This was new to us.

‘I know what you’re thinking, Edward,’ he said. He couldn’t bear to look at me, I noticed; he just stood holding Mother with his eyes fixed on some point in the distance. ‘But you can think again.’

‘What am I thinking, Father?’

‘You’re thinking it’s you who has brought this upon us. You’re thinking about having it out with the Cobleighs.’

‘Well? What are *you* thinking? Just let them get away with it?’ I indicated the two bleeding corpses on the dirt. Livestock destroyed. Livelihood lost. ‘They have to pay.’

‘It can’t be done,’ he said simply.

‘What do you mean it can’t be done?’

‘Two days ago, I was approached to join an organization – a trade organization, it was called.’

When I looked at my father I wondered if I was seeing an older version of myself and, may God strike me down for thinking it, but I fervently hoped not. He’d been a handsome man once, but now his face was lined and drawn. The wide brim of his felt hat covered eyes that were always turned down and tired.

‘They wanted me to join,’ he continued, ‘but I said no. Like most of the tradesmen in the area the Cobleighs have said yes. They enjoy the protection of the trade organization, Edward. Why else do you think they would do something so ruthless? They’re protected.’

I closed my eyes. ‘Is there anything we can do?’

‘We continue as before, Edward, and hope that this is an end to it, that the Cobleighs will feel their honour has been restored.’ He turned his tired, old eyes on me for the first time. There was nothing in them, no anger or reproach. Only defeat. ‘Now, can I trust you to get this cleared up, while I see to your mother?’

‘Yes, Father,’ I said.

He and Mother made their way back into the cottage.

‘Father,’ I called as they reached the door, ‘why didn’t you join the trade organization?’

‘You’ll learn one day, if you ever grow up,’ he said without turning.

5

In the meantime my thoughts returned to Caroline. The first thing I did was find out who she was, and by asking around Hawkins Lane I learnt that her father, Emmett Scott, was a wealthy merchant dealing in tea, who would no doubt have been seen as *new money* by most of his customers, but nevertheless seemed to have inveigled himself into high society.

Now, a man less headstrong than myself, less cocksure, might well have chosen a different path to Caroline's heart than the one I opted for. After all, her father was a supplier of fine teas to the well-to-do households in the West Country; he had money, enough to employ servants at a good-sized house on Hawkins Lane – no smallholder he, no getting up at five a.m. to feed the livestock for him. He was a man of means and influence. What I should have done – even knowing it would be futile – was try to make his acquaintance. And much of what subsequently happened – so much – could have been avoided if I had at least tried.

But I didn't.

I was young, you see. And no wonder the likes of Tom Cobleigh hated me, I was so arrogant. Despite my social status I thought currying favour with a tea merchant was below me.

Now, one thing I know is that if you love women, which I do, I'm not ashamed to say, you find something of beauty in every woman, no matter whether or not they're what you might call classically beautiful. But with Caroline it was my misfortune to fall in love with a woman whose outer beauty matched the inner, and of course her charms were likely to catch the attention of others. So the next thing I discovered about her was that she had caught the eye of Matthew Hague, son of Sir Aubrey Hague, Bristol's biggest landowner, and an executive in the East India Company.

From what I gathered, young Matthew was our age, and as self-important and jumped-up as they come, thinking himself much more than he was. He liked to wear the air of a shrewd businessman, like his father, though it was clear he possessed none of his father's aptitude in that area. What's more he liked to think himself something of a philosopher and often dictated his thoughts to a

draughtsman who accompanied him wherever he went – pen and ink at the ready to write down, whatever the circumstances, Hague's thoughts, such as, 'A joke is a stone tossed into water, laughter the ripples it makes.'

Perhaps his utterings were deeply profound. All I know is that I wouldn't have paid him much mind – indeed, I would have joined in with the general derision and laughter that seemed to accompany mention of his name – if it hadn't been for the fact that he'd showed an interest in Caroline. Perhaps even that wouldn't have worried me so much, but for two other factors. That Caroline's father, Emmett Scott, had apparently betrothed Caroline to the Hague boy, and also the fact that the Hague boy, possibly on account of his condescending manner, his tendency to make vital mistakes in even the most simple business dealings and his ability to wind people up, had a minder, a man named Wilson, who was an uncultured brute of a man, but very big, with one slightly closed-up eye, who was said to be tough.

'Life is not a battle, for battles are there to be won or lost. Life is to be experienced,' Matthew Hague had been heard to dictate to his skinny draughtsman.

Well, of course, for Matthew Hague there was precious little battling going on. Firstly, because he was the son of Sir Aubrey Hague, and, secondly, he had a dirty great minder following him everywhere.

So, anyway, I made it my business to find out where Caroline would be one sunny afternoon. How? Well, that was a case of calling in a favour, you could say. You remember Rose, the maidservant I'd helped save from a fate worse than death? Well, I reminded her of that fact one day when I followed her from Hawkins Lane to the market, and then as she made her way through the stalls, deftly avoiding the shouts of the stallholders with a basket in the crook of her arm, made my introductions.

She didn't recognize me, of course.

'I'm sure I have no idea who you are, sir,' she said with little startled eyes darting in all directions, as though her employers might come a-leaping from the aisles between the stalls.

'Well, I know exactly who you are, Rose,' I said. 'And it was me who took a beating on your behalf outside the Auld Shillelagh last week. Drunk as you were, you remember the presence of a good Samaritan, I hope?'

She nodded reluctantly. And, yes, perhaps it's not the most gentlemanly thing to do, to use a young lady's unfortunate circumstances in such a mercenary fashion to … well, I wouldn't go as far as to say *blackmail*, but as leverage, but there we have it. I was smitten, and given that my penmanship skills were none

too clever, had decided that a face-to-face encounter with Caroline was the best way to begin the process of winning her heart.

Charm the birds out the trees, see? Well, it worked on traders, and on the occasional young lady I encountered in the taverns. Why not on someone of high-born stock?

From Rose I learnt that Caroline enjoyed taking the air at the Bristol docks on a Tuesday afternoon. But, she said, with a quick look left to right, I should be wary of Mr Hague. Him and his manservant, Wilson. Mr Hague was most keen on Caroline, so Rose said, and was very protective of her.

So it was that the following morning I made sure I took a trip into town, moved my goods as quickly as possible, and then made my way down to the harbour. There the air was thick with the scent of sea salt and manure and boiling pitch, and rang to the cries of seagulls, as well as the endless shouts of those who made the docks their place of work: crews calling to one another as they loaded and unloaded ships whose masts rocked slightly in the gentle breeze.

I could see why Caroline might like it here. All life was on the harbour. From the men with baskets of freshly picked apples or pheasants hanging on twine round their necks, to the tradesmen who merely deposited baskets on the quayside and hollered at visiting deckhands, and the women with fabric, persuading jack tars they were getting a bargain. There were children who had flowers or tinder to sell, or who ran through the legs of sailors and dodged the traders, almost as anonymous as the dogs that slunk around the harbour walls and snuffled at the piles of rubbish and rotting food swept there from the day before.

Among them all was Caroline who, with a bow in her bonnet and a parasol over one shoulder, with Rose a respectful few feet behind her, looked every inch the lady. And yet, I noticed – I kept my own distance for the time being, needing to choose my moment – she didn't look down her nose at the activity around her as she so easily could have done. From her demeanour I could tell that she, like me, enjoyed seeing life in all its forms. I wondered did she also, like me, ever look out to a sea that glittered with treasure, masts of ships tilting gently, gulls flying towards where the world began, and wonder what stories the horizons had to tell?

I am a romantic man, it's true, but not a romantic fool, and there had been moments since that day outside the tavern when I'd wondered if my growing affections for Caroline were not partly an invention of my mind. She had been my saviour, after all. But now, as I walked along the harbour, I fell for her anew.

Did I expect to speak to Caroline in my sheep-farmer's clothes? Of course not. So I'd taken the precaution of changing. Trading my dirty boots for a pair of

silver-buckled shoes, neat white stockings and dark breeches, a freshly laundered waistcoat over my shirt and a matching three-cornered hat instead of my trusty brown one. I looked quite the gentleman, if I do say so myself: I was young, good-looking and full of confidence, the son of a well-respected tradesman in the area. A Kenway. The name had something at least (despite my attempts otherwise), and I also had with me a young scallywag by the name of Albert, who I had bribed to do a job for me. It doesn't take much grey matter to guess the nature of the job: he was to help me impress the fair Caroline. One transaction with a flower girl later and I had the means to do it, too.

'Right, you remember the plan,' I told Albert, who looked up at me from beneath the brim of his hat with eyes that were so much older than his years and a bored heard-it-all-before look on his face.

'Right, mate, you're to give this spray of flowers to that fine-looking lady over there. She will stop. She will say to you, "Ah, young fellow, for what reason are you presenting me with these flowers?" And you will point over here.' I indicated to where I would be standing, proud as a peacock. Caroline would either recognize me from the other day, or at the very least wish to thank her mysterious admirer, and instruct Albert to invite me over, at which point the charm offensive would begin.

'And what's in it for me?' asked Albert.

'What's in it for you? How about counting yourself lucky I don't give you a thick ear?'

He curled a lip. 'How about you taking a running jump off the side of the harbour?'

'All right,' I said, knowing when I was beaten, 'there's half a penny in it for you.'

'Half a penny? Is that the best you can do?'

'As a matter of fact, Sonny Jim, it is the best I can bloody do, and for walking across the harbour and presenting a flower to a beautiful woman it's also the easiest half-penny's work there ever was.'

'Ain't she got a suitor with her?' Albert craned his neck to look.

And, of course, it would soon become apparent exactly why Albert wanted to know whether Caroline had an escort. But at that particular moment I took his interest for nothing more than curiosity. A bit of chit-chat. Some idle conversation. So I told him that, no, she had no suitor, and I gave him the spray of flowers and his half-penny and sent him on his way.

It was as he sauntered over that something he was holding in his other hand caught my eye, and I realized what a mistake I'd made.

It was a tiny blade. And his eyes were fixed on her arm, where her purse hung on a ribbon.

Oh God. *A cutpurse*. Young Albert was a cutpurse.

'You little bastard,' I said under my breath, and immediately set off across the harbour after him.

By now he was halfway between us, but being small was able to slip between the seething crowds more quickly. I saw Caroline, oblivious to the approaching danger – danger that I had inadvertently sent into her path.

The next thing I saw were three men, who were also making their way towards Caroline. Three men I recognized: Matthew Hague, his skinny writing companion and his minder, Wilson. Inwardly I cringed. Even more so when I saw Wilson's eyes flick from Caroline to Albert and then back again. He was good, you could tell. In a heartbeat he had seen what was about to happen.

I stopped. For a second I was totally flummoxed. Didn't know what to do next.

'Oi,' shouted Wilson, his gruff tones cutting across the endless squawking, chatting, hawking of the day.

'Oi, you!' and he surged forward. But Albert had reached Caroline and in one almost impossibly fast and fluid gesture his hand snaked out, the ribbon of Caroline's purse was cut and the tiny silk bag dropped neatly into Albert's other hand.

Caroline didn't notice the theft but she couldn't fail to see the huge figure of Wilson bearing down upon her and she cried out in surprise, even as he lunged past her and grabbed Albert by the shoulders.

'This young rapscallion has something that belongs to you, miss,' roared Wilson, shaking Albert so hard that the silk purse dropped to the harbour floor.

Her eyes went to the purse and then to Albert.

'Is this true?' she said, though the evidence was in front of her eyes, and, in fact, currently sat in a small pile of horse manure by their feet.

'Pick it up, pick it up,' Hague was saying to his skinny companion, having just arrived and already beginning to behave as though it was he who had apprehended the knife-wielding youth and not his six-and-a-half-foot minder.

'Teach the young ruffian a lesson, Wilson.' This was Hague waving his hand as though attempting to ward off some especially noxious flatulence.

'With pleasure, sir.'

There were still several feet between me and them. He was held fast but Albert's eyes swivelled from looking terrified at Wilson to where I stood in the crowd and as our eyes met, he stared at me beseechingly.

I clenched my teeth. *That little bastard*, he had been about to ruin all of my plans and now he was looking to me for help. The cheek of him.

But then Wilson, holding him by the scruff of the neck with one hand, drove his fist into Albert's stomach and that was it for me. That same sense of injustice I had felt at the tavern was reignited and in a second I was shoving through the crowd to Albert's aid.

'Hey,' I shouted. Wilson swung to see me, and though he was bigger than me, and far uglier than me, I'd just seen him hit a child and my blood was up. It's not an especially gentlemanly way to conduct a fight, but I knew from experience both as giver and receiver that there was no quicker and cleaner way to put a man down, so I did it. I led with the knee. My knee into his bollocks, to be precise. So quick and so hard that where one second Wilson was a huge snarling bully about to meet my attack, the next he was a snivelling mewling heap of a man, his hands grasping at his groin as he landed on the floor.

Heedless of Matthew Hague's outraged screaming, I grabbed Albert. 'Say sorry to the lady,' I ordered him, with a finger in his face.

'Sorry, miss,' said Albert obediently.

'Now hop it,' I said and pointed him off down the harbour. He needed no second invitation and in a trice was gone, prompting even more protestations from Matthew Hague, and I thanked God that at least Albert was out of the picture and unable to dob me in.

I had saved Albert from getting a worse beating but my victory was short-lived and I certainly didn't get the time to enjoy it. Wilson was already on his feet and though his bollocks must have been throbbing something rotten, he wasn't feeling anything at that moment except rage. He was quick, too, and before I had time to react had grabbed me and was holding me firm. I tried to pull away, dipping one shoulder and driving my fist up towards his solar plexus but I didn't have the momentum and he used his body to block me, grunting as much with satisfaction as with the effort as he dragged me bodily across the harbour, people scattering before him. In a fair fight I would have had a chance, but he used his superior strength and his sudden rage-fuelled spurt of speed to his advantage, and in the next moment my feet were kicking in thin air as he flung me off the side of the harbour.

Well, I had always dreamed of taking to the high seas, and with the sound of laughter ringing in my ears I pulled myself to the nearest rope ladder and began to climb out. Caroline, Rose, Hague and his two men had already gone; I saw a hand reach down to help me up.

'Here, mate, let me help you with that,' said a voice. I looked up gratefully, about to clasp the hand of my Samaritan, only to see the leering face of Tom

Cobleigh peering over the harbour's edge at me.

'Well, the things you see when you're out without your musket,' he said and there was nothing I could do to prevent his fist smashing into my face, sending me off the rope ladder and back into the water.

6

Tom Cobleigh had made himself scarce, but Wilson must have doubled back. Chances are, he saw to it that Hague and Caroline were okay then made haste back to the harbour and found me sitting on a set of steps licking my wounds. He passed across my light and I looked up to see him, heart sinking.

'If you've come back to try that again,' I said, 'I won't make it quite so easy for you this time.'

'I have no doubt,' he replied without so much as flinching, 'but I'm not here to pitch you back in the sea, Kenway.'

At that I looked sharply at him.

'That's right, boy, I have my spies, and my spies tell me that a young gentleman by the name of Edward Kenway has been asking questions about Caroline Scott. This same young gentleman by the name of Edward Kenway was involved in a fight outside the Auld Shillelagh on the road to Hatherton last week. That same day Miss Scott was also on the road to Hatherton because her maidservant had absconded and that you and Miss Scott had cause to speak following your altercation.'

He came so close I could smell the stale coffee on his breath. Proof, if proof were needed, that he wasn't in the slightest bit intimidated – not by me nor by my fearsome reputation.

'Am I on the right lines so far, Master Kenway?'

'You might be.'

He nodded. 'I thought so. How old are you, boy? What? Seventeen? About the same age as Miss Scott. Me thinks you're nurturing a bit of a passion for her, am I right?'

'You might be.'

'I think I am. Now, I'm going to say this once and once only, but Miss Scott is promised to Mr Hague. This union has the blessing of the parents …' He hauled me to my feet, pinning my arms to my sides. Too wet, too bedraggled, too exhausted to resist, I knew what was coming anyway.

'Now, if I see you hanging around her again, or trying any more stupid stunts to try to get her attention, then it'll be more than a dip in the sea you get, do I

make myself clear?'

I nodded. 'And what about the knee in the goolies you're about to give me?'

He smiled grimly. 'Oh, that? That's personal.'

He came good on his word, and it was some time before I was able to get to my feet and make my way back to my cart. It wasn't just my tackle that was injured – my pride had taken a beating, too.

7

That night I lay in bed, cursing my luck. I had blown my chances with Caroline. She was lost to me. All thanks to that greedy urchin Albert, not to mention Hague and company; I had suffered once more at the hands of Tom Cobleigh, and father had looked at me askance when I'd arrived home, a little later than usual and, even though I had had a change of clothing, a little more bedraggled into the bargain.

'You've not been in those taverns again?' he said darkly. 'So help me God, if I hear you've been dragging our good name –'

'No, Father, nothing like that.'

He was wrong; I'd not been to the tavern on my way home. In fact, I'd not gone within sniffing distance of an ale house since the fight outside the Auld Shillelagh. I'd been telling myself that meeting Caroline had had an effect on me. Quite literally a *sobering* effect.

Now, though, I didn't know. I began to wonder – perhaps my life was there, in the beer suds, around the sloppy grins of easy women with hardly any teeth and even fewer morals, and by the time of my thirtieth summer hauling wool to Bristol market I'd be numbed to it; I'd have forgotten whatever hopes I had of one day seeing the world. Gradually the lure of the taverns asserted itself once more.

And then two things happened that changed everything. The first came in the shape of a gentleman who took his place next to me at the bar of the George and Dragon in Bristol one sunny afternoon. A smartly dressed gentleman with flamboyant cuffs and a colourful necktie, who removed his hat, placed it on the bar and indicated my drink.

'Can I get you another, sir?' he asked me.

It made a change from 'son', 'lad' or 'boy'. All of which I had to endure on a daily, if not hourly, basis.

'And who do I have to thank for my drink? And what might he want in return?' I asked guardedly.

'Perhaps just the chance to talk, friend,' beamed the stranger. He proffered his hand to shake. 'The name is Dylan Wallace, pleased to make your acquaintance,

Mr … Kenway, isn't it?'

For the second time in a matter of days I was presented with someone who knew my name, though I had no idea why.

'Oh yes,' he said, beaming (he was at least of a more friendly nature than Wilson, I reflected), 'I know your name. Edward Kenway. Quite the reputation you have around these parts. Indeed, I've seen you in action for myself.'

'Have you?' I looked at him eyes narrowed.

'Why, yes indeed,' he said. 'I hear from the people I've spoken to that you're no stranger to a bit of a ruck, but even so you can't have forgotten your fight at the Auld Shillelagh the other day.'

'I don't think I'm going to be allowed to forget it,' I sighed.

'Well, I tell you what, sir, I'm just going to come straight out with it, because you look like a young man who knows his own mind and is unlikely to be persuaded one way or the other by anything I might have to tell you. Have you ever thought of going to sea?'

'Well, now that you come to mention it, Mr Wallace, I had once considered leaving Bristol and heading in that direction, you're right.'

'So what's stopping you?'

I shook my head. 'Now *that* is a very good question.'

'Do you know what a privateer is, Mr Kenway, sir?'

Before I could answer he was telling me. 'They're buccaneers given letters of marque by the Crown. You see, the Dons and the Portuguese are helping themselves to the treasures of the New World; they're filling their coffers, and it's the job of privateers either to stop them or to take what they're taking. Do you understand?'

'I know what a privateer is, thank you very much, Mr Wallace. I know that you can't be put on trial for piracy, so long as you don't attack ships belonging to your own country, that's it, isn't it?'

'Oh, that's it, Mr Kenway, sir,' grinned Dylan Wallace. 'How would it be if I leaned over and was to help myself to a mug of ale? That'd be stealing, wouldn't it? The barman might try to stop me, but what if I was doing it with impunity. What if my theft had the royal seal of approval? This is what we are talking about, Mr Kenway. The opportunity to go out on the high seas and help yourself to as much gold and treasure as your captain's ship will carry. And, by doing so, be not only working with the approval of Her Majesty Queen Anne but *helping* her. You've heard of Captain Christopher Newport, Francis Drake, Admiral Sir Henry Morgan – privateers all. How about adding the name Edward Kenway to that illustrious list?'

'What are you saying?'

‘I’m saying how about becoming a privateer, sir?’

I gave him a studying look. ‘And if I promise to think about it, what’s in it for you?’

‘Why, commission, of course.’

‘Don’t you normally press-gang men for this kind of thing?’

‘Not men of your calibre, Mr Kenway. Not men we might consider *officer material*.’

‘All because I showed promise in a fight?’

‘Because of the way you *conducted* yourself in that fight, Mr Kenway, in all aspects of it.’

I nodded. ‘If I promise to think about it does that mean I don’t need to return the favour of an ale?’

8

I went to bed that night knowing I had to tell Father my destiny lay not in sheep farming, but in swashbuckling adventure as a privateer.

He'd be disappointed, of course, but maybe somewhat relieved also. Yes, on the one hand, I had been an asset, and had developed trading skills and put them to good use for the benefit of the family. But, on the other hand, there was the drinking, the brawling and, of course, the rift with the Cobleighs.

Shortly after the two dead carcasses had been deposited in our front yard there'd been another incident where we'd woken to find the flock had been let out in the night. Father thought fences had been deliberately damaged. I didn't tell Father about what had happened at the quayside but it was obvious Tom Cobleigh still harboured a grudge – a grudge that wasn't likely to go away any time soon.

That I had brought down on Father's head. And without me in the picture, then perhaps the vendetta would end.

And so as I laid my head down that night, my only decision was how to break the news to my father. And how my father might break the news to my mother.

And then I heard something from the window. A tapping.

I looked out with no little trepidation. What did I expect to see? I wasn't sure, but the memories of the Cobleighs were still fresh in my mind. Instead, what I saw, sitting astride her horse in the pale moonlight of the yard, as though God himself was shining his lantern upon her beauty, was Caroline Scott.

She was dressed as if for riding school. Her clothes were dark. She wore a tall hat and a white shirt and black jacket. With one hand she held the reins and the other was raised, about to throw a second fistful of gravel at my window.

I myself had been known to use the very same trick to attract the attention of a lady friend, and I remembered well the terror of waking up the whole household. So when I threw stones at a casement window, I usually did it from behind the safety of a stone wall. Not Caroline. That was the difference in our social standing. She had no fears of being run off the property with a boot in her behind and a flea in her ear. She was Caroline Scott of Hawkins Lane in Bristol. She herself was being courted by the son of an East India Company executive.

Clandestine assignation or not – and there was no doubt this was clandestine – hiding behind stone walls was not for her.

‘Well …’ she whispered. I saw her eyes dance in the moonlight. ‘Are you going to leave me sitting out here all night?’

No. In moments I was in the yard by her side, taking the reins of the horse and walking her away from the property as we spoke.

‘Your actions the other day,’ she said. ‘You put yourself in great danger in order to protect that young thief.’

(Yes, yes, I know what you’re thinking. And, yes, yes, I did feel a little guilt at that.)

(But not too much guilt.)

‘There is nothing I hate so much as a bully, Miss Scott,’ I said. Which did at least have the benefit of being true.

‘So I thought. This is twice now I have been most impressed by the gallantry of your actions.’

‘Then it is on two occasions that I have been pleased you were there to witness it.’

‘You interest me, Mr Kenway. And your own interest in me has not gone unremarked.’

I stayed silent. And we walked for a while. And even though no words were spoken there was meaning in our silence. As though we acknowledged our feelings for each other. I felt the closeness of her riding boot. Above the heat and scent of the horse, I thought I could smell the powder she wore. Never before had I been so aware of a person, of the nearness of a person.

‘I expect you have been told that I am betrothed to another,’ she said.

We stopped along the lane. There were stone walls on either side of us, the green pastures beyond interrupted by clusters of white sheep. The air was warm and dry around us, not even a breeze to disturb the trees that rose to make the skyline. From somewhere came the cry of an animal, lovelorn or hurt, but certainly feral, and a sudden disturbance in the bushes startled us. We felt like interlopers. Uninvited guests to nature’s household.

‘Why, I don’t think –’

‘Mr Kenway –’

‘You can call me Edward, Miss Scott.’

‘Well, you can continue calling me Miss Scott.’

‘Really?’

‘Oh go on then, you can call me Caroline.’

‘Thank you, Miss Scott.’

She gave me a sideways look, as though to check whether or not I was mocking her.

'Well, Edward,' she continued, 'I know full well you have been making enquiries about me. And though I do not pretend to know exactly what you've been told, I think I know the gist: that Caroline Scott is betrothed to Matthew Hague; that Matthew Hague bombards her with love poems, that the union has the blessing of his father and, of course, her father. Am I right?'

I admitted I had heard as much.

'Perhaps in the short dealings we have had together you might understand how I would feel about this particular arrangement?'

'I wouldn't like to say.'

'Then I shall spell it out for you. The thought of marriage to Matthew Hague turns my stomach. Do you think I want to live my life in the household of the Hagues? Expected to treat my husband like a king, turn a blind eye to his affairs, run the household, shout at the staff, choose flowers and pick out doilies, go visiting, take tea, trade gossip with other wives?

'Do you think I want to hide myself so deeply beneath the petty concerns of manners and etiquette that I can no longer find myself? At the moment I live between two worlds, Edward, able to see them both. The world I see on my visits to the harbour is the world that is most real to me, Edward. The one that is most alive. And as for Matthew Hague himself, I despise him almost as much as his poetry.

'Do not think me a helpless damsel in distress, Edward, because I am not that. But I'm not here for your help. I have come to help myself.'

'You've come to help yourself to *me*?'

'If you wish. Your next move is yours to make, but if you make it do so knowing this: any relationship between you and me would not have the blessing of my father, but it would have mine.'

'Excuse me, but it's not so much your father who concerns me, as his choice for you.'

'And the thought of making an enemy of the Hagues, does that put you off?'

I knew at that moment nothing would put me off. 'No, Caroline, it doesn't.'

'I hoped as much.'

We parted, with arrangements made to meet again. And after that, our relationship began in earnest. We were able to keep it a secret. For some months, in fact, our meetings were held entirely in private: snatched moments spent wandering the lanes between Bristol and Hatherton, riding in the pastures.

Until one day she announced that Matthew Hague planned to ask for her hand in marriage the following morning, and my heart stopped.

I was determined not to lose her. Because of my love for her, because I could think of nothing but her, because when we were together I savoured every moment. Every word, every gesture that Caroline made was like nectar to me – everything about her, every curve and contour, her scent, her laugh, her refined manners, her intelligence.

And all of this ran through my mind as I dropped to one knee and took her hand, because what she was telling me, perhaps it wasn't an invitation but a farewell, and if it was, well, at least my humiliation would not be known far and wide, confined to the birds in the trees and the cows that stood in the fields watching us with sleepy eyes and chewing ruminatively.

'Caroline, will you marry me?' I said.

I held my breath. During our courtship every meeting we'd had, every stolen kiss we'd shared, I'd been haunted by a feeling of not believing my luck. It was as though a great joke was being played on me – I half expected Tom Cobleigh to come leaping out of the shadows snorting with laughter. And if not that – if not some vengeful practical joke at my expense – then perhaps I was merely a diversion for Caroline, a final fling, before she applied herself to her familial duty.

'Ah, Edward,' she smiled, 'I thought you'd never ask.'

9

I couldn’t accept it, though, and I found myself travelling into town the next day, my journey taking me to Hawkins Lane. All I knew was that Matthew Hague planned to pay her a visit in the morning, and as I sidled up the highway and passed the row of houses among which was hers, I wondered if he was in there now, perhaps making his proposal.

One thing I knew of Caroline, she was a brave woman, but even so the bravest I’d ever known, but even so, she was passing up the opportunity to live the rest of her days in pampered luxury; and, worse, she was going to scandalize her mother and father. I knew only too well the pressures of trying to please a parent, how tempting it was to go down that route. An unfulfilled soul, or a soul troubled with guilt – which was the hardest cross to bear?

With me standing before her – and she loved me I’m sure of that – perhaps the decision was easier to make. But what about at night, when misgivings made their rounds and doubt came visiting? Perhaps she might simply have changed her mind and she was, at this very moment, blushing in her acceptance of Matthew Hague’s proposal, and mentally writing a letter to me.

And if that happened, well, there was always Dylan Wallace, I supposed.

But then from the corner of my eye I saw the front door open and Wilson appear, quickly followed by the draughtsman and behind them Matthew Hague, who offered his arm for Caroline, Rose taking up the rear as they began their perambulations.

Staying some distance behind, I followed them all the way to the harbour, puzzling over his intentions. Not the harbour, surely? The dirty, smelly, crowded harbour, with its stench of manure and burning pitch and just-caught fish and men who had returned from months away at sea without so much as a bath during that time.

They were making their way towards what looked like a schooner moored at the dock, around which were gathered some men. It was difficult to tell, though, because hanging from the back of the ship was some kind of canvas, obscuring the name of the vessel. However, as the group drew closer to it I thought I knew what it was. I thought I knew his plan.

Sure enough, they stopped before it and still out of sight I watched as Caroline's eyes flicked nervously from Matthew Hague to the schooner, guessing that she, too, had worked out the purpose of their visit.

Next thing I knew, Hague was down on one knee, and the staff of the schooner, Wilson and the draughtsman, were all standing with their hands behind their backs, ready for the round of applause as Matthew Hague popped his question, 'My darling, would you do me the honour of becoming my wife?'

Caroline swallowed and stammered. 'Matthew, m-must we do this here?'

He shot her a patronizing look, then with an expansive gesture of his hand ordered the canvas come off the rear of the schooner. There etched in a gold leaf was the vessel's name: *Caroline*.

'Where better place, my dear?'

And if it hadn't been for the situation I might even have slightly enjoyed the sight of Caroline at a loss. Usually she was nothing if not sure of herself. The doubt and near-panic I saw in her eyes was, I suspect, as new to her as it was to me.

'Matthew, I must say, you're embarrassing me.'

'My dear, dear Caroline, my precious flower …' he said, and made a small gesture to his draughtsman, who immediately began rooting around for his quill in order to record his master's poetic words.

'But how else would I have unveiled my marital gift to you? Now, I must press you for an answer. Please, with all these people watching …'

And, yes, I realized looking around, the entire harbour seemed to have halted, everybody hanging on Caroline's next words, which were …

'No, Matthew.'

Hague stood up so sharply that his draughtsman was forced to scurry backwards and almost lost his footing. Hague's face darkened and his lips pursed as he fought to retain composure and force a smile. 'One of your little jokes, perhaps?'

'I fear not, Matthew, I am betrothed to another.'

Hague drew himself up to his full height as though to intimidate Caroline. Standing back in the crowd I felt my blood rising and began to make my way forward.

'*To another*,' he croaked. 'And just who is this *other* man?'

'Me, sir,' I announced, having reached the front of the crowd and presented myself to him.

He looked at me with narrowed eyes. '*You*,' he spat.

From behind him Wilson was already moving forward, and in his eyes I could see his fury that I'd failed to heed his warning. And how that became his failure.

With an outstretched arm Hague stopped him. ‘No, Wilson,’ he said, adding pointedly, ‘not here. Not now. I’m sure my lady may want to reconsider …’

A ripple of surprise and, I guess, not a little humour had travelled through the crowd and it rose again as Caroline said, ‘No, Matthew, Edward and I are to be married.’

He rounded on her. ‘And does your father know about this?’

‘Not yet,’ she said, then added, ‘I’ve a feeling he soon will, though.’

For a moment Hague simply stood and trembled with rage, and for the first but not, as it would turn out, the last time, I actually felt sympathy for him. In the next instant he was barking at bystanders to get back to their work, then shouting at the schooner crew to replace the canvas, then calling to Wilson and his draughtsman to leave the harbour, turning his back pointedly on Caroline and offering me a look of hate as he exited. At his rear was Wilson and our eyes locked. Slowly, he drew a finger across his throat.

I shouldn’t have done it really; Wilson was not a man to provoke, but I couldn’t help myself, returning his death threat with a cheeky wink.

10

And that was how Bristol came to know that Edward Kenway, a sheep farmer worth a mere seventy-five pounds a year, was to marry Caroline Scott.

And what a scandal it was: Caroline Scott marrying beneath her would have been cause for gossip enough. That she had spurned Matthew Hague in the process constituted quite a stir, and I wonder if that scandal might ultimately have worked in our favour, because while I steeled myself for retribution – and for a while I looked for Wilson round every corner, and my first glance from the window to the yard each morning was filled with trepidation – none came. I saw nothing of Wilson, heard nothing of Matthew Hague.

In the end, the threat to our marriage came not from outside – not from the Cobleighs, Emmett Scott, Matthew Hague or Wilson. It came from the inside. It came from me.

I've had plenty of time to think about the reasons why, of course. And the problem was that I kept returning to my meeting with Dylan Wallace and his promises of riches in the West Indies. I wanted to go and return to Caroline a rich man. I had begun to see it as my only chance of making a success of myself. My only chance of being worthy of her. For, of course, yes, there was the immediate glory, or perhaps you might say *stature*, of having made Caroline Scott my wife, taking her from beneath the nose of Matthew Hague, but that was soon followed by a kind of … well, I can only describe it as *stagnation*.

Emmett Scott had delivered his cutting blow at the wedding. We should have been grateful, I suppose, that he and Caroline's mother had deigned to attend. Although for my own part I was not at all grateful. I would have preferred it if the pair of them had stayed away. I hated to see my father, cap in hand, bowing and scraping to Emmett Scott, hardly a noble man after all, just a merchant, separated from us not by any aristocratic leanings but by money alone.

For Caroline, though, I was glad they came. It wasn't as if they approved of the marriage, far from it, but at the very least they weren't prepared to lose their daughter over it.

I overheard her mother say, 'We just want you to be happy, Caroline,' and knew that she was speaking for herself alone. In the eyes of Emmett Scott I saw

no such desire. I saw the look of a man who had been denied his chance to clamber higher up the social ladder, a man whose dreams of great influence had been dashed. He came to the wedding under sufferance, or perhaps for the pleasure of delivering his pronouncement in the churchyard after the vows had been made.

Emmett Scott had black hair brushed forward, dark sunken cheeks and a mouth pinched permanently into a shape like a cat's anus. His face, in fact, wore the permanent expression of a man biting deep into the flesh of a lemon.

Except for this one occasion, when his lips pressed into a thin smile and he said, 'There will be no dowry.'

His wife, Caroline's mother, closed her eyes tightly as though it was a moment she'd dreaded, had hoped might not happen. Words had been exchanged, I could guess, and the last of them had belonged to Emmett Scott.

So we moved into an outhouse on my father's farm. We had appointed it as best we could, but it was still, at the end of the day, an outhouse: packed mud and sticks for the walls, our roof thatch badly in need of repair.

Our union had begun in the summer, of course, when our home was a cool sanctuary away from the blazing sun, but in winter, in the wet and wind, it was no kind of sanctuary at all. Caroline had been used to a brick-built townhouse with the life of Bristol all around, with servants to boot, her washing, her cooking, every whim attended to. Here she was not rich. She was poor. And her husband was poor. With no prospects.

I began visiting the inns once more, but I was not the same man as before, not as I'd been in the days when I was a single man, the cheerful, boisterous drunk, the jester. Now I had the weight of the world on my shoulders, and I sat with my back to the room, hunched, brooding over my ale, feeling as though they were all talking about me, like they were all saying, 'There's Edward Kenway, who can't provide for his wife.'

I had suggested it to Caroline, of course. Me becoming a privateer. And while she hadn't said no – she was still my wife, after all – she hadn't said yes, and in her eyes were doubt and worry.

'I don't want to leave you alone, but I can leave here poor and come back rich,' I told her.

Now, if I was to go, I went without her blessing. I went without her blessing and I left her alone in a farmyard shack, and her father would say I had deserted her, and her mother would despise me for making Caroline unhappy.

I couldn't win.

'Is it dangerous?' she asked one night when I spoke about privateering.

‘It wouldn’t be so highly paid if it wasn’t,’ I told her, and, of course, she reluctantly agreed that I could go. What choice did she have? But I didn’t want to leave her behind with a broken heart.

One morning, I awoke from a drunken stupor, blinking in the morning light, only to find Caroline already dressed for the day ahead.

‘I don’t want you to go,’ she said, and turned and left the room.

Another night I sat in the Livid Brews. I’d like to say I was not my usual self as I sat with my back to the rest of the tavern, hunched over my tankard, taking great big gulps in between dark thoughts and watching the level fall. Always watching the level of my ale fall.

But the sad fact of the matter was that I *was* my usual self. That younger man, always ready with a quip and a smile had disappeared. In his place, still a young man, but one who now had the cares of the world on his shoulders.

On the farm Caroline helped Mother, who at first had been horrified by the idea, saying Caroline was too much of a lady to work on the farm. Caroline had just laughed and insisted. When I had watched her stride across the same yard where I had first seen her sitting astride her horse, now wearing a crisp white bonnet, work boots, a smock and apron, I’d had a proud feeling. Now when I saw her in workclothes it reminded me of my own failings as a man.

What made it worse somehow was that Caroline didn’t seem to mind; it was as though she was the only person in the area who did not see her current position as a descent down the social ladder. Everybody else did, and none felt it more keenly than me.

‘Can I get you another ale?’ I recognized the voice that came from behind me and turned to see him there: Emmett Scott, Caroline’s father. I’d last seen him at the wedding when he refused his daughter her dowry. Now he was offering his hated son-in-law a drink. That’s the thing about the drink, though. When you’re into the drink like I was – when you watch the level of your ale fall and wonder where your next one is coming from – you’ll take a fresh mug from anyone. Even Emmett Scott. Your sworn enemy. A man who hated you almost as much as you hated him.

So I accepted his offer of an ale, and he bought his own, and pulled up a stool, which scraped on the flagstones as he sat down.

You remember Emmett Scott’s expression? That of a man sucking a lemon. Now, talking to me, the hated Edward Kenway, you’d have to say he looked even more pained. The tavern was somewhere I felt completely at home, an environment in which I could lose myself, but it didn’t suit him at all. Every now and then he would glance over one shoulder, then the other, like he was frightened of being suddenly attacked from behind.

‘I don’t think we’ve ever had a chance to talk,’ he said. And I made a short scoffing laugh in reply.

‘Your appearance at the wedding put paid to that, did it not?’

Of course the booze had loosened my tongue, made me brave. That and the fact that in the battle to win his daughter I had won. Her heart, after all, belonged to me. And there was no greater evidence of her devotion to me than the fact that she had given up so much to be with me. Even he must have seen that.

‘We’re both men of the world, Edward,’ he said simply, and you could see he was trying to make himself seem in charge. But I saw through him. I saw what he really was: a frightened nasty man, browbeaten in business, who kicked downwards, who probably beat his servants and his wife, who assumed the likes of me ought to be bowing and scraping to him as my mother and father had (and I had a twinge of rage to remember it) at the wedding.

‘How about we do a deal like businessmen?’

I took a long slug of my ale and held his eyes. ‘What did you have in mind, father-in-law of mine?’

His face hardened. ‘You walk out on her. You throw her out. Whatever you want. You set her free. Send her back to me.’

‘And if I do?’

‘I’ll make you a rich man.’

I drained the rest of my ale. He nodded towards it with questioning eyes and I said yes, waited while he fetched another one, then drank it down, almost in one go. The room was beginning to spin.

‘Well, you know what you can do with your offer, don’t you?’

‘Edward,’ he said, leaning forward, ‘you and I both know you can’t provide for my daughter. You and I both know you sit here *in despair* because you can’t provide for my daughter. You love her, I know that, because I was once like you, a man of no qualities.’

I looked at him with my teeth clenched. ‘No qualities?’

‘Oh, it’s true,’ he spat, sitting back. ‘You’re a sheep farmer, boy.’

‘What happened to “Edward”? I thought you were talking to me like an equal.’

‘An equal? There will never be a day when you will be equal to me and you know it.’

‘You’re wrong. I have plans.’

‘I’ve heard about your plans. Privateering. Becoming a man of substance on the high seas. You don’t have it in you, Edward Kenway.’

‘I do.’

‘You don’t have the moral fibre. I am offering you a way out of the hole you have dug for yourself, boy, I suggest you think about it very hard.’

I sank the rest of my ale. ‘How about I think about it over another drink?’

‘As you wish.’

A fresh tankard materialized on the table in front of me and I set to making it a thing of history, my mind reeling at the same time. He was right. This was the most devastating thing about the whole conversation. Emmett Scott was right. I loved Caroline yet could not provide for her. And if I truly was a dutiful husband then I would accept his offer.

‘She doesn’t want me to go away,’ I said.

‘And you want to?’

‘I want for her to support my plans.’

‘She never will.’

‘I can but hope.’

‘If she loves you as she says, she never will.’

Even in my drunken state I could not fault his logic. I knew he was right. He knew he was right.

‘You have made enemies, Edward Kenway. Many enemies. Some of them powerful. Why do you think those enemies haven’t taken their revenge on you?’

‘They’re frightened?’ A drunken arrogance in my voice.

He scoffed. ‘Of course they’re not frightened. They leave you alone because of Caroline.’

‘Then if I was to accept your offer there would be nothing to stop my enemies from attacking me?’

‘Nothing but my protection.’

I wasn’t sure about that.

I sank another ale; he sank deeper into despondency. He was still there at the end of the night, his very presence reminding me how far my choices had shrunk.

When I tried to stand to leave my legs almost gave way and I had to grab the side of the table just to remain on my feet. Caroline’s father, a disgusted look on his face, came to help me and before I knew it he was taking me home, though not because he wanted to see me safe, but because he wanted to make sure Caroline saw me in my drunken state, which indeed she did as I rolled in laughing. Emmett Scott puffed up and told her, ‘This tosspot is a ruined man, Caroline. Unfit for life on land, much less at sea. If he goes to the West Indies, it’s you who will suffer.’

‘Father … Father.’

She was sobbing, so upset and then as I lay on the bed I saw his boots move off and he was gone.

‘That old muck worm,’ I managed. ‘He’s wrong about me.’

‘I hope it so,’ she replied.

I let my drunken imagination carry me away. ‘You believe me, don’t you? Can you not see me, standing out there on the deck of a ship sliding into port. And there I am, a man of quality … With a thousand doubloons spilling from my pockets like drops of rain. I can see it.’

When I looked at her she was shaking her head. She couldn’t see it.

And when I sobered up the next day, neither could I.

It was only a matter of time, I suppose. My lack of prospects became like another person in the marriage. I reviewed my options. Emmett Scott offering me money in return for having his daughter back. My dreams of sailing away.

Both of them involved breaking Caroline’s heart.

11

The next day I went back to see Emmett Scott, returning to Hawkins Lane, where I knocked on the door to request an audience. Who should answer, but Rose?

‘Mr Kenway,’ she said, surprised and going slightly red. There was a moment of awkwardness, and then I was being asked to wait, and then, shortly after that, was led to Emmett Scott’s study, a room dominated by a desk in its centre, wood panelling giving it a dark, serious atmosphere. He stood in front of his desk, and, in the gloom, with his dark hair, his cadaverous look and dark, hollowed-out cheeks he looked like a crow.

‘You have thought my offer over, then?’ he said.

‘I have,’ I replied, ‘and felt it best to tell you my decision as soon as possible.’

He folded his arms and his face cracked into a triumphant smirk, ‘You come to make your demands, then? How much is my daughter worth?’

‘How much were you willing to pay?’

‘*Were?*’

It was my turn to smile, though I was careful not to overdo it. He was dangerous, Emmett Scott. I was playing a dangerous game with a dangerous man.

‘That’s right. I have decided to go to the West Indies.’

I knew where I could reach Dylan Wallace. I had given Caroline the news.

‘I see.’

He seemed to think, tapping his fingertips together.

‘But you don’t intend to stay away permanently?’

‘No.’

‘This was not the terms of my offer.’

‘Not quite the terms of your offer, no,’ I said. ‘In effect, a counter-offer. A measure I hope will find your favour. I am a Kenway, Mr Scott; I have my pride. That I hope you will understand. Understand too that I love your daughter, however much that fact may ail you, and I wish nothing but the best for her. I aim to return from my travels a rich man and with my fortune give Caroline the life she deserves. A life, I’m sure, you would wish for her.’

He was nodding, though the purse of his lips betrayed his utter contempt for the notion.

‘And?’

‘I give you my word I will not return to these shores until I am a rich man.’

‘I see.’

‘And I give you my word I will not tell Caroline that you attempted to buy her back.’

He darkened. ‘I see.’

‘I ask only to be given the opportunity to make my fortune – to provide for Caroline in the manner to which she has become accustomed.’

‘You will still be her husband – it is not what I wanted.’

‘You think me a good-for-nothing, not fit to be her husband. I hope to prove you wrong. While I am away you will no doubt see more of Caroline. Perhaps if your hatred of me runs so deeply you might use the opportunity to poison her against me. The point is, you would have ample opportunity. Moreover, I might die while at sea, in which case she is returned to you for ever: a young widow, still at an eligible age. That is my deal. In return I ask only that you allow me to try to make something of myself unhindered.’

He nodded, considering the idea, perhaps savouring the thought of me dying while at sea.

12

Dylan Wallace assigned me to the crew of the *Emperor*, which was docked in Bristol harbour and leaving in two days. I returned home and told my mother, father and Caroline.

There were tears, of course, and recriminations and pleas to stay, but I was firm in my resolve, and after I had broken my news, Caroline, distraught, left. She needed time to think, she said, and we stood in the yard and watched her gallop away – to her family, where at least she would give the news to Emmett Scott, who would know I was fulfilling my part of the deal. I could only hope – or, should I say, I hoped at the time – that he would fulfil his part of the deal, too.

Sitting here talking to you now, all these years later, well, it has to be said that I don't know whether he did. But I will. Shortly, I will. And there will be a day of reckoning …

But not then. Then I was young, stupid, arrogant and boastful. I was so boastful that once Caroline was away I took to the taverns again, and perhaps found that some of my old liveliness had returned as I told all who would listen that I was to sail away, and that Mr and Mrs Edward Kenway would soon be a rich couple thanks to my endeavours on the high seas. I took great delight in their sneering looks, their rejoinders that I was too big for my boots or did not have enough character for the task; that I would soon return with my tail between my legs; that I was letting down my father.

Not once did I let my grin slip. My knowing grin. My grin that said, 'You'll see.'

But even with the booze inside me and my departure a day or so away – or maybe even *because* of those things – I still took their words to heart. I asked myself, *Did I really have enough of a man inside me to survive the life of the privateer. Was I going to return with my tail between my legs?* And, yes, I knew that I might die.

And, also, they were right: I was letting my father down. I'd seen the disappointment in his eyes the moment I delivered the news and it had remained there since. It was a sadness, perhaps that his dream of running the farm together – fading as it must have been – had finally been dashed for good. I was not just

leaving to embrace a new life but wholeheartedly rejecting my old one. The life he had built for himself, my mother and me. I was rejecting it. I'd decided I was too good for it.

Perhaps I never gave enough thought to the effect that all of this might have on Caroline's relationship with my mother and father, but, looking back now, it is ludicrous to me to have expected her to simply remain at the farm.

One night, I returned home to find her dressed up.

'Where are you going?' I slurred, having spent most of the evening in a tavern.

She was unable to meet my gaze. By her feet was a bedsheet tied into a bulging parcel, somehow at odds with her attire, which as I focused on her I realized was more smart than usual.

'No, I …' Finally her eyes met mine. 'My parents have asked me to go and live with them. And I'd like to.'

'What do you mean, "live with them"? You live here. With me.'

She told me that I shouldn't have given up work with Father. I should have been happy with what I had.

I should have been happy with her.

Through a fog of ale I tried to tell her that I *was* happy with her. That everything I was doing I was doing for her. She had been talking to her parents while she was away, of course, and while I had expected her father to begin poisoning her against me, that muck worm, I hadn't expected him to start quite so soon.

'Decent wage?' I raged. 'That job was near as dammit to robbery. You want to be married to a peasant the whole of your life?'

I had spoken too loudly. A look passed between us and I cringed to think of my father hearing. And then she was leaving. And I was calling after her, still trying to persuade her to stay.

To no avail, and the next morning, when I'd sobered up and recalled the events of the night before, Mother and Father were brooding, staring at me with recriminatory looks. Not only had they liked – I'd go as far as saying *loved* – Caroline, because Mother had lost a daughter many years ago, so to her Caroline was the daughter she never had, but she was also a help around the farm, and did it for minimal wages. To help out, so she said …

'Maybe before the baby arrives?' my mother would say and give my grinning father a nudge in the ribs, to which Caroline would blush to her roots and reply, 'Maybe.'

Well, we were trying. And there'd be an end to that when I was away on my travels, of course. And apart from being well-liked and a help on the farm,

another female to have around the place, she'd also been helping my mother with her numbers and letters.

Now she was gone – gone because I had not been content with my lot. Gone because I wanted adventure. Because the drink was no longer doing anything to stave off boredom.

Why couldn't I be happy with her? she'd asked. I *was* happy with her.

Why couldn't I be happy with my life? she'd asked. But I wasn't happy with my life.

I went to see her, to try to persuade her to change her mind. As far as I was concerned she was still my wife, I was still her husband, and what I was doing was for the good of the marriage, for the good of *both of us*, not just me.

(And I think I kidded myself that was true. And maybe to some small degree it was true. But I knew, and probably she knew, too, that while of course I wanted to provide for her, I also wanted to see the world beyond Bristol.)

It did no good. She told me she was worried about me being hurt. I replied that I would be careful; that I would return with coin or send for her. I told her I needed her faith, but my appeals fell on deaf ears.

It was the day I was due to leave, and I left them and I packed my bags, slung them over my horse and went, with those very same recriminatory looks boring into my back, stabbing at me like arrows. And I rode into the dark as evening fell with a heavy heart, and there found the *Emperor*. But instead of the expected industry, the ship due to sail the following morning, I found it near deserted. The only people present were a group of six men who I took to be deckhands, who sat gambling with leather flasks of rum close at hand, casks for chairs, a crate for a dice table.

I looked from them to the *Emperor*. A refitted merchant ship, she was riding high in the water. The decks were empty, none of the lamps were lit and the railings shone in the moonlight. A sleeping giant, she was, and despite feeling perplexed at the lack of activity I was still in awe of her size and stature. On those decks I would serve. On hammocks in quarters below decks I would sleep. The masts I would climb. I was looking at my new home.

One of the men eyed me carefully. 'Now, what can I do for you?' he said.

I swallowed, feeling very young and inexperienced and suddenly, tragically wondering if everything they said about me – Caroline's father, the drinkers in the taverns, even Caroline herself – might be true. That, actually, I might not be cut out for life at sea.

'I'm here to join up,' I said. 'Sent here by Dylan Wallace.'

A snicker ran through the group of four and each of them looked at me with an even greater interest. 'Dylan Wallace, the recruitment man, eh?' said the first.

‘He’s sent one or two to us before. What is it you can do, boy?’

‘Mr Wallace thought I would be material enough to serve,’ I said, hoping I sounded more confident and able than I felt.

‘How’s your eyesight?’ said one.

‘My eyesight is fine.’

‘Do you have a head for heights?’

I knew what they meant now, as they pointed up to the highest point of the *Emperor*’s rigging, the crow’s-nest, home to the lookout.

‘Mr Wallace had me more in mind as a deckhand, I think.’

Officer material was what he’d actually said, but I wasn’t about to tell this lot. I was young and nervous. Not stupid.

‘Well, can you sew, lad?’ came the reply.

They were mocking me, surely. ‘What does sewing have to do with privateering, then?’ I asked, feeling a little impudent despite the circumstances.

‘The deckhand needs to be able to sew, boy,’ said one of the other men. Like all the others he had a tarred pigtail and tattoos that crept from the sleeves and neck of his shirt. ‘Needs to be good with knots, too. Are you good with knots, boy?’

‘These are things I can learn,’ I replied.

I stared at the ship with its furled sails, rigging hanging in tidy loops from the masts and the hull studded with brass barrels peeking from its gun deck. I saw myself like the men who sat on the casks before me, their faces leathery and tanned from their time at sea, eyes that gleamed with menace and adventure. Custodians of the ship.

‘You have to get used to a lot else as well besides,’ said one man, ‘scraping barnacles off the hull, caulking the boat with tar.’

‘You got your sea legs, son?’ asked another. They were laughing at me now. ‘Can you keep your stomach when she’s lashed with waves and hurricane winds?’

‘I reckon I can,’ I replied, adding with a surge of impetuous anger, ‘either way, that’s not why Mr Wallace thought I might make a good crewmate.’

A look passed between them. The atmosphere changed a little.

‘Oh yes?’ said one of them, swinging his legs round. He wore dirty canvas trousers. ‘And why is it that the recruiting officer thought you might make a good crewmate, then?’

‘Having seen me in action, he thought I might be useful in a battle.’

He stood. ‘A fighter, eh?’

‘That’s right.’

‘Well, you have ample opportunity to prove your abilities in that area, boy, starting tomorrow. Perhaps I’ll put myself down for a bout, shall I?’

‘What do you mean, “tomorrow”?’ I asked.

He had sat down, returning his attention to the game. ‘Tomorrow, when we sail.’

‘I was told we sailed tonight.’

‘Sail tomorrow, lad. Captain isn’t even here yet. We sail first thing.’

I left them, knowing I might well have made my first enemies on ship; still, I had some time – time to put things right. I retrieved my horse. And headed for home.

13

I galloped towards Hatherton, towards home. Why was I going back? Perhaps to tell them I was sorry. Perhaps to explain what was going through my mind. After all, I was their son. Maybe Father would recognize in me some vestige of himself. And maybe if he did, he would forgive me.

Because as I travelled back along the highway, what I realized more than anything was that I wanted him to forgive me. Both of them.

Is it any wonder that I was distracted, that my guard was down?

I was near to home, where the trees formed a narrow avenue, when I sensed a movement in the hedgerow. I drew to a halt and listened. When you live in the countryside you sense the changes, and something was different now. From above came a sharp whistle that could only have been a warning and at the same time I saw more movement ahead of me, except this was in the yard of our farmhouse.

My heart hammered as I spurred my horse and galloped towards the yard. At the same time I saw the unmistakable flare of a torch. Not a lamp, but a torch. The kind of torch you might use if you were intending to set something ablaze. At the same time I saw running figures and in the glare of torchlight saw that they wore hoods.

'Hey,' I shouted, as much to try to wake Mother and Father as to frighten off our attackers.

'Hey,' I yelled again.

A torch arced through the air, twirling end over end, leaving an orange trail in the night sky before landing in a shower of sparks on the thatch of our home. It was dry – *tinder dry*. We tried to keep it doused in the summer because the risk of fire was so great, but there was always something more important to do and, at a guess, it hadn't been done for a week because it went up like, *Whoompf*.

I saw more figures. Three, perhaps four. And then just as I came into the yard and pulled up, a shape flew at me from the side, hands grabbed my tunic and I was dragged from the back of my horse.

The breath was driven from me as I thumped hard to the ground. Nearby were rocks for a stone wall. *Weapons*. Then above me loomed a figure that blocked

out the moon, hooded, like the others. Before I could react he stooped and I caught a brief impression of the hood fabric pulsing at his mouth as he breathed hard, and then his fist smashed into my face. I twisted and his second blow landed on my neck. Beside him appeared another figure, and I saw a glint of steel and knew I was powerless to do anything and prepared to die. But the first man stopped the new arrival with a simple barked, '*No*,' and I was saved from the blade at least, but not from the beating, and a boot in my midriff doubled me up.

That boot – I recognized that boot.

Again it came, again and again, until at last it stopped and my attacker ran off. My hands went to my wounded belly and I rolled on to my front and coughed, the blackness threatening to engulf me. Maybe I'd let it. The idea of sinking into oblivion seemed tempting. Let unconsciousness take the pain. Deliver me into the future.

The sound of running feet as my attackers escaped. Some indistinct shouting. The cries of the disturbed ewes.

But no. I was still alive, wasn't I? About to kiss steel I'd been given a second chance and that was too good a chance to pass up. I had my parents to save. And even then I knew that I was going to make these people pay. The owner of those boots would regret not killing me when he had the chance. Of that I was sure.

I pulled myself up. Smoke drifted across the yard like a bank of incoming fog. One of the barns was already alight. The house, too. I needed to wake them, needed to wake my mother and father.

The dirt around me was bathed in the orange glow of the fire. As I stood I was aware of horse's hooves and swung about to see several riders retreating – riding away from the farmhouse, their job done, the place well alight now. I snatched up a rock and considered hurling it at one of the riders, but there were more important matters to worry about, and instead with a grunt that was part effort and part pain, I launched it at the top window of the farmhouse.

My aim was true and I prayed it would be enough to rouse my parents. The smoke thick in the yard now, the roar of the flames like an escaped hell. Ewes were screaming in the barns as they burned alive.

At the door they appeared: Father battling his way out of the flames with Mother in his arms. His face was set, his eyes blank. All he could think about was making sure she was safe. After he'd taken Mother out of the reach of the flames, and laid her carefully down in the yard near where I stood, he straightened and like me gaped helplessly at the burning building. We hurried over to the barn where the screams of the ewes had died down – our livestock,

father’s livelihood, gone. And then, his face hot and glowing in the light of the flames, my father did something I’d never seen. He began to cry.

‘Father …’ I reached for him, and he pulled his shoulder away with an angry shrug, and when he turned to me, his face blackened with smoke and streaked by tears, he shook with restrained violence, as though it was taking every ounce of his self-control to stop himself from lashing out. From lashing out at me.

‘Poison. That’s what you are,’ he said through clenched teeth, ‘poison. The ruin of our lives.’

‘Father …’

‘Get out of here,’ he spat. ‘Get out of here. I never want to see you again.’

Mother stirred as though she was about to protest, and rather than face more upset – rather than be the *cause* of more upset – I mounted my horse and left.

It would be the last time I saw either of them.

14

I flew through the night with heartbreak and fury my companions, riding the highway into town and stopping at the Auld Shillelagh, where all this had begun. I staggered inside, one arm still clutching my hurt chest, face throbbing from the beating.

Conversation in the tavern died down. I had their attention.

‘I’m looking for Tom Cobleigh and his weasel son,’ I managed, breathing hard, glaring at them from beneath my brow. ‘Have they been in here?’

Backs were turned to me. Shoulders hunched.

‘We’ll not have any trouble in here,’ said Jack the landlord from behind the bar. ‘We’ve had enough trouble from you to last us a lifetime, thank you very much, Edward Kenway.’ He pronounced ‘thank you very much’ as though it was all one word. *Thankyouverymuch.*

‘You know the full meaning of trouble if you’re sheltering the Cobleighs,’ I warned, and I strode to the bar where he reached for something I knew to be there, a sword that hung on a nail out of sight. I got there first, and stretched with a movement that set the pain in my stomach off, but grabbed it and snatched it from its scabbard in one swift movement.

It all happened too quickly for Jack to react. One second he’d been considering reaching for the sword, the next instant that very same sword was being held to his throat, *thankyouverymuch*.

The light in the inn was low. A fire bimbled in the grate, dark shadows pranced on the walls, and drinkers regarded me with narrowed, watchful eyes.

‘Now tell me,’ I said, angling the sword at Jack’s throat, making him wince, ‘have the Cobleighs been in here tonight?’

‘Weren’t you supposed to be leaving on the *Emperor* tonight?’

It wasn’t Jack; it was somebody else who spoke. Someone I couldn’t see in the gloom. Didn’t recognize the voice.

‘Aye, well my plans changed and it’s lucky they did, otherwise my mother and father would have burned in their beds.’ My voice rose. ‘Is that what you wanted all of you? Because that’s what would have happened. Did you know about this?’

You could have heard a pin drop in that tavern. From the darkness they regarded me: the eyes of men I'd drunk and fought with, women I'd taken to bed. They kept their secrets. They would continue to keep them.

From outside came the rattle and clank of a cart arriving. Everybody else heard it, too. The tension in the tavern seemed to increase. It could be the Cobleighs. Here to establish their alibi, perhaps. Still with the sword to his throat, I dragged Jack from behind the bar and to the door of the inn.

'Nobody say a word,' I warned. 'Nobody say a bloody word and Jack's throat stays closed. The only person who needs to be hurt here tonight is whoever took a torch to my father's farm.'

Voices from outside now. I heard Tom Cobleigh. I positioned myself behind the door just as it opened, with Jack held as a shield, the point of the sword digging into his neck. The silence was deathly, and instantly noticeable to the three men who were a fraction too slow to realize something was wrong.

What I heard as they came in was Cobleigh's throaty chuckle dying on his lips, and what I saw was a pair of boots I recognized, boots that belonged to Julian. So I stepped out from behind the door and ran him through with the sword.

You should have killed me when you had the chance. I'll have it on my gravestone.

Arrested in the door frame Julian simply stood and gawped, his eyes wide as he stared, first down at the sword embedded in his chest, then into my eyes. His final sight was of his killer. His final insult to cough gobbets of blood into my face as he died. Not the last man I ever killed. Not by any means. But the first.

'Tom! It's Kenway!' came a shout from within the tavern, but it was hardly necessary, even for someone as stupid as Tom Cobleigh.

Julian's eyes went glassy and the light went out of them as he slid off my sword and slumped in the door frame like a bloodied drunk. Behind him stood Tom Cobleigh and his son Seth, mouths agape like men seeing a ghost. Then all thoughts of a refreshing tankard and a satisfying boast about the night's entertainment were forgotten as they turned tail and ran.

Julian's body was in the way and they gained precious seconds as I clambered over him, emerging into the dark on the highway. Seth had tripped and was just picking himself up from the dirt, while Tom, not waiting, not stopping to help his son, had hared across the highway heading for the farmhouse opposite. In a moment I was upon Seth, the blood-streaked sword still in my hand, and it crossed my mind to make him the second man I killed. My blood was up and, after all, they say the first is the hardest. And wouldn't I be doing the world a favour, ridding it of Seth Cobleigh?

But no. There was mercy. And as well as mercy there was doubt. The chance – slim, but still a chance – that Seth hadn't been there.

Instead as I passed I brought the hilt of the sword down hard on the back of his head and was rewarded with an outraged, pained scream and the sound of him sprawling, hopefully unconscious, back to the dirt, as I dashed past him, arms and legs pumping as I crossed the road in pursuit of Tom.

I know what you're thinking. I had no proof Tom had been there either. But I just knew. I just knew.

Across the roadway, he risked a quick glance over his shoulder before placing both hands on the top of the stone wall and heaving himself over. Seeing me, he let out a small, frightened whimper and I had time to think that though he was sprightly for a man of his years – his speed aided by his fear, no doubt – I was catching up with him, and tossed the sword from one hand to the other in order to vault the wall, land on two feet on the other side and sprint off in pursuit.

I was close enough to smell his stink, but he'd reached an outhouse and disappeared from view. I heard the scrape of boot on stone nearby, as though a third person was in the yard, and dimly wondered if it was Seth. Or perhaps the farm owner. Perhaps one of the drinkers from the Auld Shillelagh. Focused on finding Tom Cobleigh, I gave it no mind.

By the wall of the outhouse I crouched, listening hard. Wherever Cobleigh was, he'd stopped moving. I glanced to my left and right, and saw only farm buildings, black blocks against the grey night, and heard only the occasional bleating of a goat and the sound of insects. On the other side of the highway lights burned at the window but otherwise the tavern was quiet.

Then, in the almost oppressive quiet I heard a crunch of gravel from the other side of the building. He was there waiting for me.

I thought about our positions. He'd be expecting me to come running recklessly from round the side of the outhouse. So, very slowly, and as quietly as I could, I crept towards the opposite corner. I winced as my boots disturbed the stones and hoped the noise wouldn't carry. Then I began to edge quietly along the side of the building and at the end stopped and listened. If I was right Tom Cobleigh would be lying in wait at the other side. If I was wrong I could expect a knife in my belly.

I held my breath then risked a peek round the side of the outhouse.

I'd judged right. There was Cobleigh at the far corner. His back was to me and in his fist was a raised knife. Waiting for me to appear, he was a sitting duck. I could have reached him in three quick strides and slipped my blade into his spine before he had a chance to fart.

But no. I wanted him alive. I wanted to know who his companions had been. Who the tall ring-wearing man able to stop Julian from killing me had been.

So instead I disarmed him. Literally. I darted forward and I cut his arm off.

Or, that was the intention, at least. But my inexperience as a swordsman was all too obvious, or was it simply because the sword was too blunt? Either way as I brought it down two-handed on Tom Cobleigh's forearm, it cut his sleeve and burrowed into the flesh, but didn't sever the arm. At least he dropped the knife.

Cobleigh screamed and pulled away. He grabbed at his wounded arm that jetted blood across the wall of the outhouse and on to the dirt. At the same time I saw a movement in the darkness and remembered the noise I had heard, that possible other presence. Too late. The shadows delivered a figure into the moonlight, and I saw blank eyes behind the hood, and workclothes and boots that were somehow too clean.

Poor Tom Cobleigh. He never saw it coming and virtually backed on to the stranger's sword, pinned as the new arrival thrust his blade into his back and through the front of his ribcage so that it emerged dripping blood. He looked down at it, a grunt his final worldly utterance before the stranger flicked his sword to one side and the corpse span from the blade and thumped heavily to the dirt.

There is a saying, isn't there? *My enemy's enemy is my friend*. Something like that. But there's always an exception that proves the rule and in my case he was a man in a hood with a bloodstained sword. My neck was still stinging from the mark of his ring. My face still throbbed from his fists. Why he'd killed Tom Cobleigh, I had no idea and didn't care; instead with a warrior roar I lunged forward and the shafts of our swords rang like bells in the quiet night.

He parried easily. One. Two. From going forward I was already being driven back, forced to defend messily and sloppily. Inexperienced swordsman? I wasn't a swordsman at all. I might as well have been wielding a club or a cosh for all the skill I had with the blade. With a swish of his sword point he opened a gash in my arm and I felt warm blood wash down my bicep and soak my sleeve, before the strength seemed to leak out of my sword arm. We weren't fighting. Not any more. He was playing with me. Playing with me before he killed me.

'Show me your face,' I gasped, but he made no reply. The only sign he'd even heard was a slight smiling of the eyes. Then the arc of his sword fooled me and I was too slow – not just a little too slow, but *far too slow* – to stop him opening a second gash in my arm.

Again he struck. Again. I've since realized he cut me with the precision of a medical man, enough to hurt but not permanently injure me. Certainly enough to disarm me. And in the end I didn't feel the sword drop from my fingertips. I just

heard it hit the dirt and looked down to see it on the ground with the blood from my wounded arm dripping on to the blade.

Perhaps I expected him to remove his hood. But he did not. Instead he levelled the point of his sword just below my chin and with his other hand indicated for me to drop to my knees.

'You don't know me well enough if you think I'm going to meet my end on my knees, stranger,' I told him, feeling oddly calm in the face of defeat and death. 'If it's all the same to you I'll stay standing.'

He spoke in tones deep and flat, possibly disguised. 'You'll not meet your end tonight, Edward Kenway. More's the pity. But I tell you this. Unless the *Emperor* sails with you on it tomorrow this night is only the beginning for anyone bearing the Kenway name. Leave at first light and no more harm will come to your mother or father. But if that ship sails without you they will suffer. You *all* will. Do I make myself clear?'

'And do I get to know the identity of my gracious enemies?' I asked.

'You do not. You should know only that there are forces in this world more powerful than you could possibly comprehend, Edward Kenway. Tonight you have seen them in action. You have suffered at their hands. Let this be an end to it. Never return to these shores. And now, Edward Kenway, *you will kneel*.'

His sword came up and the hilt smashed into my temple.

When I woke up I was on the *Emperor*.

15

At least I thought I was on the *Emperor*. I hoped so anyway. And with my head throbbing, I pulled myself out of my hammock, put my boots to the deck and was sent flying forward.

My fall was broken – by my face. I lay groaning on the planks for a moment or so, wondering why I felt so drunk when I didn't remember doing any actual drinking. Except, of course, I wasn't drunk.

But if I wasn't drunk why was the floor moving? It tipped this way and that, and I spent a moment or so waiting for it to settle until I realized that the constant rocking was exactly that. Constant. It wasn't going to stop.

On unsteady feet that shuffled and danced in the sawdust I straightened, hands out like a man trying to negotiate a balancing beam. My body still hurt from the beating I'd taken but I was on the mend, my wounds a day or so old.

What hit me next was the air thick with a smell. No, not a smell. *A stench*.

Oh my days it stank. A mix of shit, piss, sweat and seawater. A smell I came to learn was unique to the below decks of a ship. Just as every butcher's shop and every tavern has its own smell, so does every below decks. The frightening thing was how quickly you got used to it.

The smell was of men, and on the *Emperor* there were one hundred and fifty of the blighters, who when they weren't manning their positions, hanging from the rigging or crowded into the galleys, would sleep cuddled up to carriages on the gun decks, or in hammocks much like the one I'd woken up in.

I could hear one of the crew now, sniggering in the shadows as the ship lurched and I was thrown against a wooden support, then just as violently slammed into a column opposite. Sea legs. That was what they called it. I had to get my sea legs.

'Is this the *Emperor* ?' I said into the murk.

The creak of the ship. Like the smell and the sea legs it was something I'd get used to.

'Aye, you're on the *Emperor*,' came the reply.

'I'm new on the ship,' I called into the darkness, clinging on for dear life.

There was a rasping chuckle. 'You don't say.'

‘How far are we from land?’

‘A day. You were brought on asleep or unconscious. Too much booze, I’d say.’

‘Something like that,’ I replied, still hanging on to the support for dear life. My mind went to the events of the last day or so, but it was like worrying at an open wound. Too soon, too painful. I’d need to try to make sense of what had happened. I’d need to face the guilt, and I’d have letters to write. (Letters I wouldn’t have been able to write without Caroline’s tuition, I reminded myself, with a fresh feeling of regret). But all that would have to wait until later.

From behind me came a grating, wrenching sound. I swung round and squinted in the half-light, and when my eyes adjusted I could see a capstan. From above I could hear feet and the raised voices of men at work on the deck above. The capstan groaned and creaked and turned.

‘*Heave*,’ came the shout from above. ‘*Heave*.’ Despite everything the sound of it made me a wide-eyed little boy again.

I cast my gaze around. Either side of me were the rounded shapes of the carriage guns. Their barrels shone dully in the dark. At the other end of the deck I could see where a rope ladder hung from a square of daylight. I headed there, climbed to the quarterdeck above.

I soon discovered how my shipmates had earned their sea legs. Not only did they sport a different style of dress to men of the land – short jackets, checked shirts, long, canvas breeches – but they had a different style of walking, too. Their entire bodies seemed to move with the ship, something that happened entirely by instinct. I spent my first couple of days on board being tossed from pillar to post by the heaving waves beneath us, and had to grow accustomed to the sound of laughter as I sprawled on the deck time after time. But soon, just as I got used to the smell below decks, and the constant creak of the hull, and the sense that the whole sea was kept at bay by a few puny planks of wood and coats of caulking, so I learnt to move with the motion of the water, with the *Emperor*. Soon I, too, walked like every other man on board.

My shipmates were nut-brown, every single one of them. Most wore scarves or handkerchiefs tied loosely round the neck, had tattoos, beards and wore gold earrings. There were older crewmates aboard, their brown, weather-worn faces like melted candles, their eyes hooded and cautious, but most were about ten years older than I was.

They came from all over I soon discovered: London, Scotland, Wales, the West Country. Many of our number, around a third, were black; some of them runaway slaves who’d found freedom on the seas, treated as an equal by their captain and shipmates – or should that be, treated as the same level of scum by their captain and shipmates. There were also men from the American colonies,

from Boston, Charleston, Newport, New York and Salem. Most seemed to wear weapons constantly: cutlasses, daggers, flintlock pistols. Always more than one pistol, it seemed, which I soon found out was due to the danger of the first one failing to fire because of a damp charge.

They liked to drink rum, were almost unbelievably coarse in their language and the way they spoke about women, and liked nothing better than a roaring argument. But what bonded them all were the captain's articles.

He was a Scotsman. Captain Alexander Dolzell. A big man, he rarely smiled. He adhered to the articles of the ship, and liked nothing more than reminding us of them. Standing on the sterncastle deck, his hands on the rail as we stood assembled on the quarterdeck, main deck and forecastle, warning us that any man who fell asleep on duty would be tarred and feathered. Any man found with another man would be punished with castration. No smoking below decks. No pissing in the ballast. (And, of course, as I've already told you, that particular article was something I carried over to my own commands.)

I was fresh, though, and new on board ship. At that stage of my career I don't think it would even have occurred to me to break the rules.

I soon began to settle into the rhythm of life at sea. I found my sea legs, learnt which side of the ship to use depending on the wind and to eat with my elbows on the table to stop my plate from sliding away. My days consisted of being posted as lookout or on watch. I learnt how to take soundings in shallow waters and picked up the basics of the navigation. And I learnt from listening to the crew, who when not exaggerating tales of going into battle against the Spanish, liked nothing better than to impart nuggets of nautical wisdom: *'Red at night, sailor's delight. Red in the morning, sailors take warning.'*

The weather. The winds. What slaves we were to them. When it was bad the usual cheery atmosphere would be replaced by one of grim industry as the day-to-day business of keeping the ship afloat became a matter of simple survival in hurricane winds, when we would snatch food in between maintaining sail, patching the hull and pumping out. All done with the quiet, concentrated desperation of men working to save their own lives.

Those times were exhausting, physically draining. I'd be kept awake, told to climb the ratlines or man pumps below decks, and any sleep would be snatched below decks, curled up against the hull.

And then the weather would abate and life would resume. I watched the activities of the older crewmates, their drinking, gambling and womanizing, understanding how relatively tame my own exploits in Bristol had been. Some of those I used to encounter in the taverns of the West Country, how they thought of themselves as hardened drinkers and brawlers, if only they could have been here

to see my shipmates in action. Fights would break out over nothing. At the drop of a hat. Knives pulled. Blood drawn. In my first month at sea I heard more bones crunch than I had in the previous seventeen years of my life. And don't forget: I grew up in Swansea and Bristol.

And yet the violence would dissipate as quickly as it had flared up; men who moments before had been holding blades to each other's throats would make up with a round of bear hugs that looked almost as painful as the fighting, but which seemed to have the desired effect. The articles stated that any man's quarrels should be ended on shore by sword or pistol in a duel. Nobody really wanted that, of course. A quarrel was one thing, possibility of death quite another. So fights tended to be over as quickly as they'd begun. Tempers would flare, then die down.

Because of this genuine grievances on board were few and far between. So it was just my luck to be on the receiving end of one.

I first became aware of it on my second or third day aboard, because I turned, feeling a penetrating stare upon me and returned it with a smile. A friendly smile, or so I thought. But one's man's friendly smile is another man's cocky grin and all it seemed to do was infuriate him even more. Back came a glare.

The next day as I made my way along the quarterdeck I was struck by an elbow so hard that I fell to my knees, and when I looked up, expecting to see a grinning face – 'Gotcha!'– saw only the smirking face of the same man as he glanced over his shoulder on his way to his station. He was a big man. Not the sort you'd want to be on the wrong side of. Looked like I was on the wrong side of him, though.

Later I spoke to Friday, a black deckhand who often had the hammock near mine. When I described the man who had knocked me down, he knew who I was talking about straight away.

'That'll be Blaney.'

Blaney. That was all I ever heard anybody call him. And unfortunately – by which I mean, unfortunately for *me* – Blaney hated me. He hated the guts of me.

There was probably a reason. Since we'd never spoken it couldn't have been an especially good reason; the important thing was it existed in Blaney's head, which at the end of the day was all that mattered. That and the fact that Blaney was big and, according to Friday, skilled with a sword.

Blaney, you might have guessed by now, was one of the gentlemen I first met the evening that I arrived early for the departure of the *Emperor*. Now, I know what you're thinking: he was the one to whom I'd spoken, who was all ready to teach me a lesson or two for my impudence.

Well, no, if you thought that you'd be wrong. Blaney was one of the other men sitting at the cask playing cards. A simple, brutish man, with what you might call a prominent forehead, thick eyebrows that were permanently bunched together as though he was always confused about something. I hardly noticed him on the night and, thinking about it now, perhaps that was why he was so infuriated; perhaps that's why the grudge was born: he'd felt ignored by me.

'Why might he have taken against me?' I asked, to which Friday could only reply with a shrug and a mumble of 'Ignore him', and then he closed his eyes to indicate our conversation was at an end.

So I did. I ignored him.

This obviously infuriated Blaney even more. Blaney didn't want to be ignored. Blaney wanted to be taken notice of. He wanted to be feared. My failure to be frightened of Blaney, well, it – yes, it stoked his hatred of me.

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Meantime, there were other things to think about. For example, a rumour going round the crew that the captain was feeling left out of spoils. There had been no raids for two months; we'd not earned so much as a half-penny and there were rumblings of discontent, most of which were coming from his cabin. It became common knowledge that our captain felt as though he was holding up his end of the bargain, but getting little in return.

What bargain, you might ask? Well, as privateers, we provided a presence for Her Majesty; it was as though we were unenlisted soldiers in her war against the Spanish. In return, of course, we were allowed to raid Spanish ships with impunity, which means as much as we bloody well wanted, and for as long as anyone could remember that's exactly what had happened.

There were fewer and fewer Spanish ships at sea, however. At port, we'd begun to hear rumours that the war might be coming to an end; that a treaty might soon be signed.

Captain Dolzell, though, well, you'd have to give him credit for being able to look ahead of times and see which way the wind was blowing, and what with us being left out of spoils, he decided to take us on a course of action that was outside the remit of our letters of marque.

Trafford, the mate, stood next to Captain Dolzell, who removed his tricorne and wiped sweat from his brow, before replacing it and addressing us all.

'This raid will make us rich, lads; your pockets will split. But I've got to warn ye, and I would be failing my duty as your captain if I did not, that it is indeed a risky venture.'

Risky. Yes. The risk of capture, punishment and death by the drop of the hangman's scaffold.

A hanged man's bowels open, I'd been told. A pirate's breeches would be tied at the ankles to stop the shit escaping. It was the indignity of that which scared me more than anything. It wasn't how I wanted Caroline to remember me, dangling from a rope, reeking of shit.

I had not left Bristol in order to become a fugitive from the law, a pirate. And if I stayed with the ship and we went through with the captain's plan then that is

what I would be. We would have the combined forces of the East India Company's own Marines, plus no doubt Her Majesty's navy, after us.

No, I hadn't joined up as a privateer in order to become a pirate, but all the same if I was ever going home I couldn't do it penniless. I had this idea that if I returned with riches I could pay the price on my head, that my enemies might be appeased.

So, no, I hadn't joined up to be a pirate. The money I earned would be earned legally.

And please cease your sniggering. I know how quaint I sound now. But back then, I still had fervour in my belly and dreams in my head. So when the captain made his offer, when he said he knew not all on board would want a part of any badness, and that anybody not wanting a part of the badness should say now, or for ever hold their peace, so that he could organize passage off the ship, I went to step forward.

Friday stopped me with a surreptitious hand. Not looking at me. Just stopping me moving forward and staring straight ahead. From the side of his mouth he said, 'Wait' and I didn't have to wait long to find out why. Five of the crew had shuffled up the deck, good men who wanted no part of any piracy. At a word from the captain the first mate had these five good men thrown overboard.

I decided there and then to keep my trap shut. And what I decided instead was this: I would follow the captain, but only up to a point. I'd follow him, reap my share of the money we made and then jump ship. After I'd jumped ship, I'd join up with other privateers – after all, I was an experienced jack tar now – and deny ever having been on the *Emperor* when this terrible crime was committed.

As plans go, it wasn't especially sophisticated. It had its flaws, I had to admit, but yet again I found myself stuck between a rock and a hard place, with neither of my options particularly appealing.

As the appeals of the men thrown overboard receded behind us, the captain went on to outline his plans for piracy. He didn't go so far as suggesting we attack the Royal Navy, that would have been suicide; instead, he knew of a target to be found along the west coast of Africa. So there, in January 1713, was where the *Emperor* headed.

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January, 1713

As we sailed among the islands we would drop anchor in a sheltered bay or river estuary and men would be sent ashore to find supplies: wood, water, beer, wine, rum. We could be there for days and we'd pass the time catching turtles to eat or taking potshots at birds, or hunting cattle, goats or pigs if we could.

Once we had to careen the *Emperor*, which involved beaching her then using block and tackle to turn her over. We used lit torches to burn off seaweed and barnacles, caulk her and replace any rotten planks, all under the direction of the ship's carpenter, who used to look forward to such occasions. Hardly surprising, really, because we also took the opportunity to make repairs to the masts and sails, so he had the pleasure of ordering around the quartermaster, as well as the first and second mates, who had no choice but to keep their mouths shut and carry on with the task.

They were happy days: fishing, hunting, enjoying the discomfort of our superiors. It was almost a disappointment having to set sail again. But set sail we did.

The ship we were after was a merchant ship run by the East India Company and we came across her off the coast of west Africa. There'd been many rumblings below decks regarding the wisdom of the enterprise. We knew that by attacking such a prestigious vessel we were making ourselves wanted men. But the captain had said there were only three naval warships and two naval sloops patrolling the entire Caribbean Sea, and that the East India Company's ship, the *Amazon Galley*, was said to be carrying treasure, and that providing we brought the *Galley* to a halt in open water, out of sight of land, we should be able to plunder the ship at our leisure, escape and be out of it.

Wouldn't the crew of the *Galley* be able to identify us, though? I wondered aloud. Wouldn't they tell the navy they'd been attacked by the *Emperor*? Friday had just looked at me. I didn't care for that look he gave me.

We found it on the third day of hunting.

‘Sail ho!’ came the cry from above. We’d been used to hearing it, so we didn’t get our hopes raised. Just watched as the captain and quartermaster conferred. Moments later they’d confirmed it was the *Galley* and we set off across the water towards it.

As we approached we raised a red ensign, the British flag, and sure enough the *Galley* remained where she was, thinking us an English privateer on her side.

Which we were. *In theory.*

Men primed their pistols and checked the action of their swords. Boarding hooks were taken up and the guns manned. As we came up alongside and the *Galley* crew realized we were primed for battle, we were close enough to see their faces fall and panic gallop through the ship like a startled mare.

We forced her to heave to. Our men raced to the gunwales, where they stood ready for action, aiming pistols, manning the swivel guns or with cutlasses drawn and teeth bared. I had no pistol and my sword was a rusty old thing the quartermaster had found at the bottom of a chest, but even so. Squeezed in between men twice my age but ten times as fierce, I did my utmost to scowl with as much ferocity as they did. To look just as savage.

The guns below were trained on the *Galley* opposite. One word and we’d open fire with a volley of shot, enough to break their vessel in half, send them all to the bottom of the sea. On the faces of their crew was the same sick, terrified expression. The look of men caught out, who now had to face the terrible consequences.

‘Let your captain identify himself,’ our first mate called across the gap between our two vessels. He produced a timer and banged it down on the gunwale rail. ‘Send out your captain before the sands run out, or we shall open fire.’

It took them until their time was almost up, but he appeared on deck at last, dressed in all his finery and fixing us with what he hoped was an expression of defiance – which couldn’t disguise the trepidation in his eyes.

He did as he was told. He followed instructions, ordered a boat to be launched, then clambered aboard and was rowed across to our ship. Secretly I couldn’t help but feel sympathy for him. He put himself at our mercy in order to protect his crew, which was admirable, and his head was held high when, as he ascended the Jacob’s ladder from his boat, he was jeered at by the men manning the mounted guns on the deck below, before being grabbed roughly by the shoulders and hauled over the rail of the gunwale to the quarterdeck.

When he was dragged to his feet he pulled away from the men’s clutching hands, threw his shoulders back and, after adjusting his jacket and cuffs, demanded to see our captain.

‘Aye, I’m here,’ called Dolzell, who came down from the sterncastle with Trafford, the first mate, at his heels. The captain wore his tricorne with a bandanna tied beneath it, and his cutlass was drawn.

‘And what’s your name, captain?’ he said.

‘My name is Captain Benjamin Pritchard,’ replied the merchant captain sourly, ‘and I demand to know the meaning of this.’

He drew himself up to full height but was no match for the stature of Dolzell. Few men were.

‘The *meaning* of this,’ repeated Dolzell. The captain wore a thin smile, possibly the first time I had ever seen him smile. He cast an arch look around at his men gathered on the deck, and a cruel titter ran through our crew.

‘Yes,’ said Captain Pritchard primly. He spoke with an upper-class accent. Oddly, I was reminded of Caroline. ‘I mean exactly that. You are aware, are you not, that my ship is owned and operated by the British East India Company and that we enjoy the full protection of Her Majesty’s navy?’

‘As do we,’ replied Dolzell. At the same time he indicated the red ensign that fluttered from the topsail.

‘I rather think you forfeited that privilege the moment you commanded us to stop at gunpoint. Unless, of course, you have an excellent reason for doing so?’

‘I do.’

I glanced across to where the crew of the *Galley* were pinned down by our guns but just as enthralled by the events on deck as we were. You could have heard a pin drop. The only sound was the slapping of the sea on the hulls of our ships and the whisper of the breeze in our masts and rigging.

Captain Pritchard was surprised. ‘You do have a good reason?’

‘I do.’

‘I see. Then perhaps we should hear it.’

‘Yes, Captain Pritchard. I have forced your vessel to heave to in order that my men might plunder it of all its valuables. You see, pickings on the seas have been awfully slim of late. My men are getting restless. They are wondering how they will be paid on this trip.’

‘You are a privateer, sir,’ retorted Captain Pritchard. ‘If you continue along this course of action you will be a *pirate*, a wanted man.’ He addressed the entire crew. ‘You *all* will be wanted men. Her Majesty’s navy will hunt you down, and arrest you. You’ll be hanged at Execution Dock then your bodies displayed in chains at Wapping. Is that really what you want?’

Pissing yourself as you died. Stinking of shit, I thought.

‘Way I hear it, Her Majesty is on the verge of signing treaties with the Spanish and the Portuguese. My services as a privateer will no longer be required. What

do you think my course of action will be then?'

Captain Pritchard swallowed, for there was no real answer to that. And now, for the first time ever, I saw Captain Dolzell really smile, enough to reveal a mouth full of broken and blackened teeth, like a plundered graveyard. 'Now, sir, how about we retire to discuss the whereabouts of whatever treasure you might happen to have on board?'

Captain Pritchard was about to complain, but Trafford was already moving forward to grab him and he was propelled up the steps and into the navigation room. The men, meanwhile, turned their attention to the crew of the ship opposite, and an uneasy, threatening silence reigned.

And then we began to hear the screams.

I jumped, my eyes going to the door of the cabin to which they had gone. Darting a look at Friday I saw that he, too, was staring at the navigation-room door, an unreadable look on his face.

'What's going on?' I asked.

'Hush. Keep your voice down. What do you think is going on?'

'They're torturing him?'

He rolled his eyes. 'What did you expect, rum and pickles?'

The screams continued. Over on the other ship the men's expressions had changed. A moment ago they had stared at us resentfully, balefully, as though biding their time before they might launch a cunning counter-attack. Like we were scoundrels and knaves and would soon be whipped like the scurvy dogs we were. Now in their eyes was sheer terror – that they might be next.

It was strange. I felt both ashamed and emboldened by what was happening. I've caused my fair share of pain, and left sorrow in my wake, but I've never been able to abide cruelty for its own sake. Dolzell would have said, 'Not for its own sake, boy; to find out where the treasure was hid.' But he would have been telling a half-truth. For the fact was that as soon as our men swarmed their vessel they'd quickly locate whatever booty was aboard. No, the real purpose of torturing the captain was the changing faces of the men who stood opposite. It was to strike terror into their crew.

Then, after I don't know how long, perhaps a quarter of an hour or so, when the screams had reached a peak, when the heartless sniggering of the deckhands had been exhausted, and even the most pitiless man had begun to wonder if, perhaps, enough pain had been inflicted for one day, the door to the navigation room was thrown open. And Dolzell and Trafford appeared.

Wearing a look of grim satisfaction the captain surveyed the men of our own ship and then the apprehensive faces of the other crew, before pointing and saying, 'You, boy.'

He was pointing at me.

‘Y-yes, sir,’ I stammered.

‘Into the cabin, boy. Guard the captain, while we find out what his information is worth. You too.’ He was pointing at somebody else. I didn’t see who as I hurried to the front of the quarterdeck, barging against the tide of a surge towards the gunwales as men readied themselves to board the other ship.

And then I had the first of two shocks as I entered the navigation room and saw Captain Pritchard.

The cabin had a large dining table that had been set to one side. As too was the quartermaster’s table, on which were laid his navigation instruments, maps and chart.

In the middle of the cabin Captain Pritchard sat tied to a chair, his hands bound behind him. Lingering in the cabin was a brackish smell I couldn’t place.

Captain Pritchard’s head hung, chin on his chest. At the sound of the door he lifted it and focused bleary, pain-wracked eyes on me.

‘My hands,’ he croaked. ‘What have they done to my hands?’ Before I could find out I had my second surprise, when my fellow jailer entered the room and it was none other than Blaney.

Oh shit. He pulled the door to behind him. His eyes slid from me to the wounded Captain Pritchard and back to me again.

From outside came the cries of our crew as they prepared to board the other ship, but it felt as though we were cut off from it, as though it was happening far away and involved people not known to us. I held Blaney’s gaze as I walked round to the back of the captain, where his hands were tied behind his back. And I realized what the smell had been. It was the smell of burnt flesh.

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Dolzell and Trafford had pushed lit fuses between Captain Pritchard's fingers in order to make him talk. There was a scattering of them on the boards, as well a jug of something that when I put my nose to it I thought was brine they'd used to pour on his wounds, to make them more painful.

His hands were blistered, charred black in some places, raw and bleeding in others, like tenderized meat.

I looked for a flask of water, still cautious of Blaney, wondering why he hadn't moved. Why he hadn't spoken.

He put me out of my misery. 'Well, well, well,' he rasped, 'we find ourselves together.'

'Yes,' I replied drily. 'Aren't we lucky, mate?'

I saw a jug of water on the long table and moved towards it.

He ignored my sarcasm. 'And what would you be up to exactly?'

'I'm fetching water to put on this man's wounds.'

'Captain didn't say nothing about attending to the prisoner's wounds.'

'He's in pain, man, can't you see?'

'Don't you talk to me like that, you little whelp,' snapped Blaney with a ferocity that chilled my blood. Still, I wasn't going to show it. Full of bravado. Always tough on the outside.

'You sound like you're fixing up for a fight, Blaney.'

I hoped I came across more confident than I felt.

'Aye, maybe I am at that.'

He had a brace of pistols in his belt and a cutlass at his waist, but the silver that seemed to appear in his hand, almost from nowhere, was a curved dagger.

I swallowed.

'And what do you plan on doing, Blaney, with the ship about to mount a raid, us in charge of guarding the captain here? Now, I don't know what it is you have against me, what measure of grudge it is you're nursing, but it'll have to be settled another time, I'm afraid, unless you've got a better idea.'

When Blaney grinned, a gold tooth flashed. 'Oh, I've got other ideas, boy. An idea that maybe the captain here tried to escape and ran you through in the

process. Or how about another idea altogether? An idea that it was *you* who helped the captain. That you untied the prisoner and tried to make good your escape, and it was me who stopped you, running you both through in the process. I think I like that idea even better. How's about that?'

He was serious, I could tell. Blaney had been biding his time. No doubt he wanted to avoid the flogging he would have received for giving me a beating. But now he had me where he wanted.

Then something happened that directed me. I'd knelt down to see to the captain and something caught my eye. The ring he was wearing. A thick signet ring, it bore a symbol I recognized.

The day I'd woken up on the *Emperor* I'd found a looking glass below decks and inspected my wounds. I had cuts, bruises and scrapes; I looked like what I was: a man who'd been beaten up. One of the marks was from where I'd been punched by the man in the hood. His ring had left its imprint on my skin. A symbol of a cross.

I saw that very same symbol now on Captain Pritchard's ring.

Despite the poor man's discomfort I couldn't help myself. 'What's this?'

My voice, a little too sharp and a little too loud, was enough to arouse the suspicions of Blaney, and he pushed himself away from the closed cabin door and moved further into the room to see.

'What is what?' Pritchard was saying, but by now Blaney had reached us. And he too had seen the ring, only his interest in it was less to do with its meaning, more to do with its value, and without hesitation, and heedless to Pritchard's pain, he reached and yanked it off, flaying the finger of burnt and charred skin at the same time.

The captain's screams took some time to die down, and when they had, his head lolled forward on to his chest and a long rope of saliva dripped to the cabin floor.

'Give me that back,' I said to Blaney.

'Why should I give it to you?'

'Now come on, Blaney –' I started. And then we heard something. A shout from outside.

'Sail ho!'

It wasn't as though our feud was forgotten, more like it was placed to one side for a moment as Blaney said, 'Wait there.' And pointing with his dagger he left the room to see what was going on.

The open door framed a scene of panic outside and as the ship lurched it slammed shut. I looked from that to Captain Pritchard, now groaning in pain. I'd never wanted to be a pirate. I was a sheep farmer from Bristol. A man in search

of adventure, it's true. But by fair means not foul. I wasn't a criminal, an outlaw. I'd never wanted to be party to the torture of innocent men.

'Untie me,' said the captain, his voice dry and pained. 'I can help you. I can guarantee you a pardon.'

'If you tell me about the ring.'

Captain Pritchard was moving his head slowly from side to side as though to shake away the pain. 'The ring, what ring … ?' he was saying, confused, trying to work out why on earth this young deckhand should be asking him about such an irrelevance.

'A mysterious man I consider my enemy wore a ring just like yours. I need to know its significance.'

He gathered himself. His voice parched but measured. 'Its significance is great power, my friend, great power that can be used to help you.'

'What if that great power was being used against me?'

'That can be arranged as well.'

'I feel it already has been used against me.'

'Set me free and I can use my influence to find out for you. Whatever wrong has been done to you I can see it put right.'

'It involves the woman I love. Some powerful men.'

His next words reminded me of something the man in the hood had said that night in the farmyard. 'There are powerful men and powerful men. I swear on the Bible, boy, that whatever ails you can be solved. Whatever wrong has been done to you can be put right.'

Already my fingers were fiddling with his knots but just as the ropes came away and slithered to the cabin floor the door burst open. Standing in the doorway was Captain Dolzell. His eyes were wild. His sword was drawn. Behind him was a great commotion. Men who moments before had been ready to board the *Amazon Galley*, as organized a fighting unit as privateers could be, were suddenly in disarray.

Captain Dolzell said one word, but it was enough.

The word was. *'Privateers.'*

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‘Sir?’ I said.

And thankfully, Dolzell was too preoccupied with developments to wonder what I was doing standing behind Captain Pritchard’s chair. ‘Privateers are coming,’ he cried.

In terror I looked from Dolzell to where I’d just untied Captain Pritchard’s hands.

Pritchard revived. And though he had the presence of mind to keep his hands behind his back, he couldn’t resist taunting Dolzell. ‘It’s Edward Thatch, come to our rescue. You’d better run, captain. Unlike you, Edward Thatch is a privateer loyal to the Crown and when I tell him what has taken place here –’

In two long strides Dolzell darted forward and thrust the point of his sword into Pritchard’s belly. Pritchard tautened in his seat, impaled on the blade. His head shot back and upside-down eyes fixed on mine for a second before his body went limp and he slumped in the chair.

‘You’ll tell your friend nothing,’ snarled Dolzell as he removed his blade.

Pritchard’s hands fell to hang limply by his sides.

‘His hands are untied.’ Dolzell’s accusing eyes went from Pritchard to me.

‘Your blade, sir, it sliced the rope,’ I said, which seemed to satisfy him, and with that he turned and ran from the cabin. At the same time the *Emperor* shook – I later found out that Thatch’s ship had hit us side-on. There were some who said the captain had been rushing towards the fight and that the impact of the privateers’ ship had knocked him off the deck, over the gunwale and into the water. There are others who said that the captain, with images of Execution Dock in his mind, had plunged off the side in order to escape capture.

From the navigation room I took a cutlass and a pistol that I thrust into my belt, then dashed out of the cabin and on to the deck.

What I found was a ship at war. The privateers had boarded from the starboard, while on the port side the crew of the *Amazon Galley* had taken their opportunity to fight back. We were hopelessly outnumbered and, even as I ran into the fray with my sword swinging, I could see that the battle was lost. Sluicing across the deck was what looked like a river of blood, while everywhere

I could see men I had been serving with dead, draped over the gunwales, their bodies lined with bleeding slashes. Others were fighting on. There was the roar of musket and pistol, the day torn apart by the constant ring of steel, the agonized screams of the dying, the warrior yells of the attacking buccaneers.

And yet, even so, I found myself strangely on the outside of the battle. Cowardice has never been a problem with me, but I am not sure I exchanged more than two sword strokes with one of the enemy, before it seemed the battle was over. Many of our men were dead. The rest began to drop to their knees and let their swords fall to the deck, hoping, no doubt, for the clemency of our invaders. Some still fought on, including the first mate, Trafford – by his side another man I didn't know. Melling, I think his name was – and, as I watched, two of the attacking buccaneers came at him at once, swinging their swords with such force that no amount of fighting skill could have stopped them and he was driven back to the rail, slashes and cuts opening up in his face, screaming as they both stabbed into him.

Blaney was there I saw. Also, not far away, was the third captain, a man I would come to know as Edward Thatch, and who years later the world would know as Blackbeard. He was just as the legend would describe him, though his beard was not so long back then: tall and thin, with thick dark hair. He had been in the fray, his clothes were splattered with blood and it dripped from the blade of his sword. He and one of his men had advanced up the deck and I found myself standing with two of my shipmates, Trafford and Blaney.

Blaney. It would have to be him.

And now the battle was over. I saw Blaney look from me to Trafford, then to Thatch. A plan formed and in the next instant he'd called to Thatch. 'Sir, shall I finish them for you?' And he swept his sword around to point at me and Trafford. For me he reserved an especially evil grin.

We both stared at him in absolute disbelief. *How could he do this?*

'Why, you scurvy bilge-sucking bastard!' yelled Trafford, outraged at the treachery, and he leapt towards Blaney, jabbing his cutlass more in hope than expectation – unless his expectation was to die, for that's exactly what happened.

Blaney stepped easily to one side and at the same time whipped his sword in an underhand slash across Trafford's chest. The first mate's shirt split and blood drenched his front. He grunted in pain and surprise, but that didn't stop him launching a second, yet sadly for him, even wilder attack. Blaney punished him for it, slashing again with the cutlass, landing blow after blow, catching Trafford again and again across the face and chest, even after Trafford had dropped his own blade, fallen to his knees and with a wretched whimper and blood bubbling at his lips pitched forward to the deck and lay still. I snatched up a sword and

launched myself at Blaney, but my attack was just as haphazard as poor old Trafford, and Blaney hardly broke a sweat disarming me.

The rest of the deck had fallen silent, each man left alive was now looking over to where we stood near the entrance to the captain's cabin – just Blaney and I between the invaders and the doorway.

'Shall I finish him, sir?' said Blaney. The point of his sword was at my throat. Again, the grin.

The crowd of men seemed to part round Edward Thatch as he stepped forward.

'Now –' he waved at Blaney with his cutlass, which still dripped with the blood of our crew – 'why would you be calling me, "sir", lad?'

The point of Blaney's sword tickled my throat. 'I hope to join you, sir,' he replied, 'and prove my loyalty to you.'

Thatch turned his attention to me. 'And you, young 'un, what did you have in mind, besides dying at your shipmate's sword, that is? Would you like to join my crew as a privateer or die a pirate, either at the hands of your crewmate here, or back home in Blighty?'

'I never wanted to be a pirate, sir,' I said quickly. (Stop yer grinning.) 'I merely wanted to earn some money for my wife, sir, honest money to take back to Bristol.'

(A Bristol from which I was banished and a wife I was prevented from seeing. But I decided not to bother Thatch with the little details.)

'Aye,' laughed Thatch, and threw out an arm to indicate the mass of captured men behind him, 'and I suppose I could say this for every one of your crew left alive. Every man will swear he never intended a career in piracy. Ordered to do it by the captain, they'll say. Forced into it against their will.'

'He ruled with a rod of iron, sir,' I said. 'Any man who said as much would be telling you the truth.'

'And how did your captain manage to persuade you to enter into this act of piracy, pray tell?' demanded Thatch.

'By telling us we would soon be pirates anyway, sir, when a treaty was signed.'

'Well, he's right most likely,' sighed Thatch thoughtfully. 'No denying it. Still, that's no excuse.' He grinned. 'Not while I remain a privateer that is, sworn to protect and assist Her Majesty's navy, which includes watching over the likes of the *Amazon Galley*. Now, you're not a swordsman, are you, boy?'

I shook my head.

Thatch chuckled. 'Aye, that is apparent. Didn't stop you throwing yourself at this man here, though, did it? Knowing that you would meet your end at the

point of his sword. Why was that then?'

I bristled. 'Blaney had turned traitor, sir; I saw red.'

Thatch jammed the point of his cutlass into the deck, rested both hands on the hilt and looked from me to Blaney, who had added wariness to his usual expression of angry incomprehension. I knew how he felt. It was impossible to say from Thatch's demeanour where his sympathies lay. He simply looked from me to Blaney, then back again. From me to Blaney, then back again.

'I have an idea,' he roared at last, and every man on the deck seemed to relax at once. 'Let's settle this with a duel. What do you say, lads?'

Like a set of scales, the crew's spirits rose as mine sank. I had barely used a blade. Blaney, on the other hand, was an experienced swordsman. Settling the matter would be the work of a heartbeat for him.

Thatch chuckled. 'Ah, but not with swords, lads, because we've already seen how this one here has certain skills with the blade. No, I suggest a straight fight. No weapons, not even knives. Does that suit you, boy?'

I nodded my head, thinking what would suit me most was no fight at all, but a straight fight was the best I could hope for.

'Good.' Thatch clapped his hands and his sword juddered in the wood. 'Come on, lads, form a ring; let these two gentlemen get to it.

The year was 1713, and I was about to die, I was sure of it.

Thinking about it – that was twelve years ago, wasn't it? It would have been the year you were born.

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‘Then let us begin,’ Thatch commanded.

Men had shimmied up the rigging and clung to the masts. Men were in the ratlines, on the rails and the top decks of all three ships – every man-jack of them craning to get a better view. Playing to the crowd, Blaney stripped off his shirt so that he was down to his breeches. Conscious of my puny torso I did the same. Then we dropped our elbows, raised our fists, eyed each other up.

My opponent grinned behind raised forearms – his fists were as big as hams and twice as hard. His knuckles like statues’ noses. No, this probably wasn’t quite the sword fight Blaney wanted, but it was the next best thing. The chance to pulverize me with the captain’s consent. To beat me to death without risking the taste of a cat-o’-nine-tails.

From the decks and rigging came the shouts of the crew, keen to witness a good bout. By which I mean a bloody bout. Just from the catcalls it was difficult to make out if they had a favourite, but I put myself in their position: what would I want to see if I were them? I’d want to see *sport*.

So let’s give it to them, I thought. I brought my own fists up higher and what I thought about was how Blaney had been a huge pain in the arse from the moment I had set foot on board. Nobody else. Just him. This thick-as-pigshit cretin. All my time on ship I’d spent dodging Blaney and wondering why he hated me, because I wasn’t snot-nosed and arrogant then, not like I’d been back home. Life on board had tamed that side of me. I dare say I’d grown up a bit. What I’m saying is, he had no real *reason* to hate me.

But right then it came to me. The reason why. He hated me *because*. Just because. And if I hadn’t been around to hate he would have found someone else to fill my shoes. One of the cabin boys, perhaps. One of the blacks. He just liked hating.

And for that I hated him in return, and I channelled that feeling, that hate. Perplexed at his hostility? I turned it into hate. Staying out of his way day after day? I turned it into hate. Having to look at his stupid, thick face day after day? Turned it into hate.

And because of that the first strike was mine. I stepped in and it seemed to explode out of me, using my speed and my size to my advantage, ducking beneath his protecting fists and smashing him in the solar plexus. He let out an oof and staggered back, the surprise more than the pain making him drop his guard, enough for me to dance quickly to my left and drive forward with my left fist, finding a spot above his right eye that, just for one delicious second, I thought might have been good enough to finish him off.

A roar of approval and bloodlust from the men. It had been a good punch. Enough to open a cut that began to leak a steady stream of blood down his face. But, no, it wasn't enough to stop him for good. Instead the look of angry incomprehension he always wore became even more uncomprehending. Even angrier. I'd landed two punches, he precisely none. He hadn't even moved from his spot.

I flitted back. I've never been one for fancy footwork, but compared to Blaney I was nimble. Plus I had the advantage. First blood to me and with the crowd on my side. David versus Goliath.

'Come on, you fat bastard,' I taunted him. 'Come on, this is what you've wanted to do the minute I came aboard the ship. Let's see what you got, Blaney.'

The crew had heard me and shouted their approval, perhaps for my sheer gumption. From the corner of my eye I saw Thatch throw back his head and laugh, with his hand at his belly. To save face, Blaney had to act. You have to give it to him. He acted.

Friday had told me that Blaney was skilled with his blade, and was an essential member of the *Emperor*'s boarding party. He hadn't mentioned that Blaney was also good with his fists. He'd left that bit out. And I, for some reason, never assumed he had much in the way of boxing skills. But one bit of nautical wisdom I had learnt was 'never assume' and, on this occasion at least, I ignored it. Once again my arrogance had got me into trouble.

And how quick the crowd was to turn as Blaney struck. Never go down in the fight. It's the one golden rule. Never go down in a fight. But I had no choice as his fist made contact and bells rang in my head as I went to the deck on my hands and knees, and spat out teeth on a string of blood and phlegm. My vision jarred and blurred. I'd been hit before, of course, many times, but never – *never* – as hard as that.

Amid the rushing of my pain and the roaring of the spectators – roaring for blood, which Blaney was going to give to them, with pleasure – he bent to me, putting his face close enough for me to smell his rancid breath, which spilled like fog over black and rotted teeth.

‘ “Fat bastard”, eh?’ he said and hawked up a green. I felt the wet slap of phlegm on my face. One thing you have to say about a ‘fat bastard’ taunt. It always gets them going.

And then he straightened, and I could see his boot so near to my face I saw the spider-cracks in the leather, and still trying to shake off the pain I lifted one pathetic hand as though to ward off the inevitable kick.

The kick, though, when it came was aimed not at my face but squarely at my belly, and was so hard that it lifted me into the air and I was deposited back on the deck. From the corner of my eye I saw Thatch, and perhaps I had allowed myself to believe that he favoured me in the bout, but he was laughing just as heartily at my misfortune as he had been when Blaney was rocked. I rolled weakly to my side as I saw Blaney coming towards me. He lifted his boot to stamp on me and looked up to Thatch. ‘Sir?’ he asked.

To hell with that; I wasn’t waiting. With a grunt I grabbed his foot, twisted it and sent him sprawling back to the deck. A tremor of renewed interest ran through the spectators. Whistles and shouts. Cheers and boos.

They didn’t care who won. They just wanted the spectacle. But now Blaney was down and with a fresh surge of strength I threw myself on top of him, pummelling him with my fists at the same time as I drove my knees into his groin and midriff, attacking him like a child in the throes of a temper tantrum, hoping against hope that I might lay him out with a lucky blow.

I didn’t. There were no lucky blows today. Just Blaney grabbing my fists, wrenching me to the side, slamming the flat of his hand into my face and sending me flying backwards. I heard my nose break and felt blood gush over my top lip. Blaney lumbered over and this time he wasn’t waiting for Thatch’s permission. This time he was coming in for the kill. In his fist shone a blade …

There was the crack of a pistol and a hole appeared on his forehead. His mouth dropped open, and the fat bastard fell to his knees – dead to the deck.

When my vision cleared I saw Thatch reaching to help me from the deck with one hand. In the other, a flintlock pistol, still warm.

‘I got a vacancy on my crew, lad,’ he said. ‘Do you want to fill it?’

I nodded as I stood and looked down at Blaney’s body. A wisp of smoke rose from the bloody hole in his forehead. *Should have killed me when you had the chance*, I thought.

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March, 1713

Miles away in a place I'd never visited and never would – although, after all, it's never too late – a bunch of representatives of England, Spain, France, Portugal and Holland were sitting down to draft a series of treaties that would end up changing all our lives, forcing us to take a new direction, shattering our dreams.

But that was to come. First, I found myself adjusting to a new life – a life I liked very much.

I was lucky, I suppose, because Edward Thatch took to me. A scrapper, was what he called me. And I think he liked having me around. He used to say that in me he had a trusted hand, and he was right, he did; for Edward Thatch had saved me from embarking on a life of crime under Captain Dolzell – well, either that or be thrown overboard like those other poor fellows. It was thanks to his intervention, and thanks to being taken under his wing that I could make something of myself, return to Bristol and to Caroline as a man of quality, head held high.

And, yes, just because you and I know that it didn't work out that way doesn't make it any less true.

Life at sea was very much the same as it had been before, but with certain attractive differences. There was no Blaney, of course. The last I'd seen of that particular barnacle on my life was him slipping into the sea like a dead whale. And there was no Captain Alexander Dolzell. He ended up being condemned to death by the British in 1715. Without those two life on ship immediately improved; it was the life of a privateer. And so we engaged the Spanish and Portuguese when we could, and took prizes when we could, and along with the skills of a sailor I began to refine the craft of combat. Thatch took me under his wing. From him I learnt better sword skills, and I learnt how to use pistols.

And, also from Edward Thatch, I learnt a certain philosophy of life, a philosophy that he in turn had learnt from another older buccaneer, a man under who Edward served, who would also be my mentor. A man named Benjamin Hornigold.

And where else should I meet Benjamin but at Nassau?

I'm not sure we ever thought of the port of Nassau on New Providence Island as ever really 'belonging' to us, because that wasn't our way. But it was a kind of heaven for us, with its steep cliffs on one side, its long sloping beach that swept down to a shallow sea – too shallow for His Majesty's men-of-war – its quayside where we offloaded booty and supplies, and its hillside fortress on the hill, overlooking a raggle-taggle collection of shanty houses, huts and crumbling wooden terraces. And of course, it had a wonderful harbour, where vessels enjoyed shelter from the elements and from our enemies. Making an attack even more difficult was the ships' graveyard, where the skeletal remains of burnt and grounded ships were a warning to the unwary. There were the palms, the smell of seawater and tar in the air, taverns and plentiful run. And Edward Thatch was there. And Benjamin Hornigold was there.

I liked Benjamin. He had been Blackbeard's mentor, just as Blackbeard was mine, and there was never a better sailor than Benjamin Hornigold.

And yet, although you may think I'm only saying this because of what subsequently happened, you're going to have to believe me when I swear it's true. I always thought there was something apart about him. Not only did he have a more military bearing and a hawk nose like a toff English general, but he dressed differently as well, more like a soldier than a buccaneer.

But still, I liked him, and if I didn't like him as much as I liked Edward, well, then I respected him as much, if not more. After all, Benjamin was the one who had helped establish Nassau in the first place. For that, if nothing else, I liked him.

I was sailing with Edward in July 1713 when the quartermaster was killed on a trip ashore. Two weeks after that we received a message and I was called to the captain's quarters.

'Can you read, son?'

'Yes, sir,' I said, and I thought briefly of my wife back home.

Edward sat at one side of his navigation table rather than behind it. His legs were crossed and he wore long black boots, a red sash at his waist and four pistols in a thick leather shoulder belt. Maps and charts were laid out beside him but something told me it wasn't those he needed reading.

'I need a new quartermaster,' he said.

'Oh, sir, I don't think –'

He roared with laughter and slapped his thighs. 'No, son, I don't "think" either. You're too young and you don't have the experience to be a quartermaster. Isn't that right?'

I looked at my boots.

‘Come here,’ he said, ‘read this.’

I did as I was asked, reading aloud a short communication with news of a treaty between the English, the Spanish, Portuguese …

‘Does it mean … ?’ I said when I had finished.

‘Indeed it does, Edward,’ he said (and it was the first time he’d ever called me by my name rather than ‘son’ or ‘lad’ – in fact, I don’t think he ever called me ‘son’ or ‘lad’ again). ‘It means your Captain Alexander Dolzell was right, and that the days of privateers filling their boots are over. I’ll be making an announcement to the crew later. Will you follow me yourself?’

I would have followed him to the ends of the Earth but I didn’t say so. Just nodded, as though I had a lot of options.

He looked at me. All that black hair and beard lent his eyes an extra penetrating shine. ‘You will be a pirate, Edward, a wanted man. Are you sure you want that?’

To tell you the truth, I wasn’t, but what choice did I have? I couldn’t go back to Bristol. I didn’t dare go back without a pot of money, and the only way of making money was to become a pirate.

‘We shall set sail for Nassau,’ said Thatch. ‘We pledged to meet Benjamin should this ever happen. I dare say we shall join forces, for we’ll both lose crew in the wake of this announcement.

‘I’d like you by my side, Edward. You’ve got courage and heart and skill in battle, and I can always use a man with letters.’

I nodded, flattered.

When I went back to my hammock, though, and was alone, I closed my eyes for fear that tears might squeeze out. I had not come to sea to be a pirate. Oh, of course, I saw I had no other choice but to follow that path. Others were doing it, including Edward Thatch. But even so, it was not what I had wanted for myself. I’d never wanted to be an outlaw.

Like I say, though, I didn’t feel I had much choice. And from that moment on, I abandoned any plans I had of returning to Bristol as a man of quality. The best I could hope for was to return to Bristol as a man of means. From that moment on my quest became one of acquiring riches. From that moment on I was a pirate.

Part Two

22

June, 1715

There is nothing quite so loud as the sound of a carriage-gun blast. Especially when it goes off in your ear.

It's like being pummelled by nothing. A nothing that seems to want to crush you. And you're not sure whether it's a trick of your eyesight, shocked and dazzled by the blast, or whether the world really is shaking. Probably it doesn't even matter.

Somewhere the shot impacts. Boat planks splinter. Men with their arms and legs torn off, and men who look down and in the few seconds they have before dying realize half their body has been shot away, begin shrieking. All you hear in the immediate aftermath is the shrieking of the damaged hull, the screams of the dead and dying.

I wouldn't say you ever get used to it, the blast of a carriage gun, the way it tears a hole in your world, but the trick is to recover swiftly. The trick is to recover from it more swiftly than your enemy. That's how you stay alive.

We'd been off the coast of Cape Buena Vista in Cuba when the English had attacked. We called them the English upon the brigantine, even though English made up the core of our crew and I myself was English by birth, English in my heart. But it counted for nothing as a pirate. You were an enemy of His Majesty (Queen Anne had been succeeded by King George), an enemy of the Crown. Which made you an enemy of His Majesty's navy. And so when, 'Sail ho!', we saw the red ensign on the horizon, the sight of a frigate foaming across the ocean towards us and the figures running to and fro on her decks, what we said was, 'The English are attacking! The English are attacking!' with no regard for the small details of our actual nationalities.

And this one, she came at us fast. We were trying to turn and put distance between us and her six-pounders, but she bore down upon us, slicing across our bows, so close we could see the whites of the crew's eyes, the flash of their gold teeth, the glint of sun on the steel in their hands.

Flame bloomed along her sides as her carriage guns thundered. Steel tore the air. Our hull shrieked and cracked as the shots found their mark. The day had been full of rain. The powder smoke turned it into a night full of rain. It filled our lungs and made us cough, choke and splutter, throwing us into even more disarray and panic.

And then that feeling of the world crashing in, that shock, and those moments of wondering if you'd been hit and if maybe you were dead, and perhaps this was what it felt like in heaven. Or most likely – in my case at least – in hell. Which of course it must do, because hell is smoke and fire and pain and screaming. So in actual fact whether you were dead or not, it made no difference. Either way you were in hell.

At the first crash-bang I'd raised my arms to protect myself. Luckily. I felt shards of splintered wood that would otherwise have punctured my face and eyes embed themselves into my arm, and the force was enough to send me staggering back, tripping and falling.

They'd used bar shot. Big iron bars that would blast a hole in virtually anything provided they were close enough. In this case, they'd done their job. The English had no interest in boarding us. As pirates we would inflict as little damage upon our target as possible. Our aim was to board and to loot, over a period of days if needs be. It was difficult to loot a sinking ship. But the English – or this particular command, at least – either knew we had no treasure aboard or didn't care – they simply wanted to destroy us. And they were doing a bloody good job of it.

I dragged myself to my feet, felt something warm running down my arm and looked to see blood from a splinter blob to the planks of the deck. With a grimace I reached to tear the wood from my arm and tossed it to the deck, barely registering the pain as I squinted through a fog of powder smoke and lashing rain.

A cheer went up from the crew of the English frigate as she churned past our starboard side. There was the pop and fizz of musket and flintlock pistol shot. Stinkpots and grenadoes came sailing over, exploding on deck and adding to the chaos, the damage and the choking smoke that hung over us like a death shroud. The stinkpots in particular let out a vicious sulphur gas that sent men to their knees, making the air so dense and black that it became difficult to see, to judge distance.

Even so, I saw him: the hooded figure who stood on their forecastle deck. His arms were folded, and he stood still in his robes, his entire demeanour emanating unconcern at the events that were unfolding around him. This I could tell from

his posture and his eyes that gleamed from beneath the cowl of his robes. Eyes that for a second were fixed on me.

And then our attackers were swallowed up by smoke. A ghost ship amid a fug of powder belch, sizzling rain and choking stinkpot fumes.

All around me was the sound of shattering wood and screaming men. The dead were everywhere, littering torn planks awash with their blood. Through a gash in the main deck I saw water on the decks below and from above heard the complaint of wood and the tearing of the smoky shroud, and looked up to see our mainsail half destroyed by chain shot. A dead lookout with most of his head shorn away hung by his feet from the crow's-nest and men were already scaling the ratlines to try to cut the broken mast free, but they were too late. She was already listing, wallowing in the water like a fat woman taking a bath.

At last enough of the smoke cleared to see that the British frigate was coming round in order to use its starboard guns. But now she ran into a spot of bad luck. Before the ship could be brought to bear, the same wind that had dispersed the smoke dropped, and her plump sails flattened and she slowed. We had been given our second chance.

'Man the guns!' I shouted.

Those members of our crew still on their feet were scrambling to the mounted guns. I manned a swivel gun and we delivered a broadside that the attacking frigate could do nothing about, our shot inflicting almost as much damage to them as they had to us. And now it was our turn to cheer. Defeat had turned if not quite to victory, then at least to a lucky escape. Perhaps there were those of us who were even wondering what treasures might be on board the British vessel, and I saw one or two of our men, the optimistic few, with boarding hooks, axes and marlinspikes, ready to lash the ship close and take them on man on man.

But any plans were dashed by what happened next.

'*The magazine*,' came the cry.

'She's going up.'

The news was followed by screams, and as I looked from my post at the swivel gun towards the bow, I saw flames around the breach in the hull. Meanwhile, from the stern came the cries of our captain, Captain Bramah, while on the poop deck of the ship opposite, the man in the robes leapt into action. Literally. He unfolded his arms and in one short jump was on the rail of the deck, then in the next instant had jumped across to our ship.

For a moment the impression I had of him in the air was like an eagle, his robes spread out behind him, his arms outstretched like wings.

Next I saw Captain Bramah fall. Crouched over him the hooded man's arm pulled back and a hidden blade sprang from within his sleeve.

That blade. I was transfixed by it for a second. The flames from the burning deck made it alive. And then the hooded man drove it deep into Captain Bramah.

I stood and stared, my own cutlass in my hand. From behind I vaguely heard the cries of the crew as they tried in vain to stop the fire spreading to the magazine.

It will go up, I thought distractedly. *The magazine will explode*. Thinking of the barrels of gunpowder stored there. The English ship close enough so that the explosion would surely blast a hole in the hull of both ships. All of this I knew, but only as distant distracted thoughts. I was spellbound by the hooded man at work. Mesmerized by this agent of death, who had ignored the carnage around him by biding his time and waiting to strike.

The kill was over, Captain Bramah dead. The assassin looked up from the dead body of the captain, and once again our eyes met, only this time something flared within his features and in the next instant he had bounded to his feet, a single lithe jump that took him over the corpse, and he was bearing down upon me.

I raised my cutlass, determined not to go easily into the great unknown. And then from the stern – in fact, from the magazine, where our men had obviously failed to douse the fire whose fingers had found the stores of gunpowder – came a great explosion.

In a thunderclap I was blasted off the deck, describing a circle in the air and finding a moment of perfect peace, not knowing whether I was alive or dead, whether I still had all of my limbs and in that moment not caring anyway. Not knowing where I'd come to rest: whether I'd slam to the deck of a ship and break my back or land impaled on a snapped mast or be tossed into the eye of the magazine inferno.

Or what I did, which was slap into the sea.

Maybe alive, maybe dead, maybe conscious, maybe not. Either way I seemed to drift not far below the surface, watching the sea above: a shifting mottle of blacks, greys and the flaming orange of burning ships. Past me sank dead bodies, eyes wide open as though surprised in death. They discoloured the water in which they sank and trailed guts and stringy sinew like tentacles. I saw a smashed mizzen mast twirling in the water, bodies snared in rigging dragged to the depths.

I thought of Caroline. Of my father. Then of my adventures on the *Emperor*. I thought about Nassau, where there was only one law: pirate law. And, of course,

I thought about how I had been mentored from privateer to pirate by Edward – Edward Thatch.

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All of this I thought as I sank, eyes open, aware of everything happening around me: the bodies, the wreckage … Aware of it, yet uncaring. As though it was happening to somebody else. Looking back, I know it for what it was, that brief moment – and it was brief – as I sank in the water. I had, in those moments, lost the will to live.

After all, this expedition – Edward had warned against it. He'd told me not to go. 'That Captain Bramah's bad news,' he'd said. 'You mark my words.'

And he was right. And I was going to pay for my greed and stupidity with my life.

And then I found it again. The will to go on. I found it. I grasped it. I shook it. I held it close to my bosom and from that moment to this I never let it go again. My legs kicked, my arms arrowed, and I streaked towards the surface, breaking the water and gasping – for air, and in shock at the carnage around me, watching as the last of the English frigate slipped below the water, still ablaze. All across the ocean were small blazes soon to be doused by the water, floating debris everywhere, and men, of course – survivors.

And then, just as I had feared, the sharks started to attack, and the screams began – screams of terror at first and then, as the sharks began to investigate more insistently, screams of agony that only intensified as more predators gathered and they began to feed. The screams I'd heard during the battle, agonized as they were, were nothing compared to the shrieks that tore that soot-filled afternoon apart.

I was one of the lucky ones, whose wounds were not enough to attract the sharks' attention, and I swam for shore. At one point I was knocked by a shark gliding past, thankfully too concerned with joining the feeding frenzy to stop. My foot seemed to snag what felt like a fin in the water and I prayed that whatever blood I was leaking was not enough to tempt the shark away from the more plentiful chum elsewhere. It was a cruel irony that those more heavily wounded were the ones who were attacked first.

I say 'attacked'. You know what I mean. They were eaten. Devoured. How many survivors there were from the battle, I have no way of knowing. All I can

say is that I saw that most survivors ended up as food for the sharks. Me, I swam to the safety of the beach at Cape Buena Vista and there I collapsed with sheer relief and exhaustion, and if the dry land hadn't been made up entirely of sand I probably would have kissed it.

My hat was gone. My beloved three-pointer, which had sat upon my head as man and boy. What I didn't know at the time, of course, was that it was the first step in me shedding the past, saying goodbye to my old life. What's more, I still had my cutlass, and given the choice between losing my hat or cutlass …

And so, after some time thanking my lucky stars, listening out for other survivors but hearing just faint screams in the distance, I rolled on to my back, then heard something to my left.

It was a groan. And looking over I saw its source was the robed assassin. He'd come to rest just a short distance away from me and he was lucky, very lucky, not to be eaten by the sharks, because when he rolled over to his back he left behind a patch of crimson-stained sand. And as he lay there with his chest rising and falling, his breath coming in short, jagged gasps, his hands went to his stomach. His obviously wounded stomach.

'Was it good for you as well?' I asked, laughing. Something about the situation struck me as funny. Even after these few years at sea, there was still something of the Bristol brawler about me, who couldn't help but make light of the situation, no matter how dark it seemed. He ignored me. Or ignored the quip at least.

'Havana,' he groaned, 'I must get to Havana.'

That produced another smile from me. 'Well, I'll just build us another ship, will I?'

'I can pay you,' he said through gritted teeth. 'Isn't that the sound you pirates like best? A thousand escudos.'

That had aroused my interest. 'Keep talking.'

'Will you or won't you?' he demanded to know.

One of us was badly wounded, and it wasn't me. I stood to look over him, seeing the robes, hidden in which, presumably, was his blade. I had liked the look of that blade. I had the feeling that the man in possession of that particular blade might go far. Especially in my chosen trade. Let's not forget that before my ship's magazine had exploded this very man was about to use that very blade on me. You may think me callous. You may think me cruel and ruthless. But, please understand, in such situations a man must do what is necessary to survive, and a good lesson to learn if you're standing on the deck of a burning ship about to move in for the kill: finish the job.

Lesson two: if you don't manage to finish the job, it's probably best not to expect help from your intended target.

And lesson three: if you ask your intended target for help anyway, probably best not to start getting angry with them.

For all those reasons I ask you not to judge me. I ask you to understand why I gazed down at him so dispassionately.

'You don't have that gold on you now, do you?'

He looked back at me, and his eyes blazed briefly and then in a second, more quickly than I could possibly have anticipated – imagined even, he'd drawn a pocket pistol and shoved it into my stomach. The shock more than the impact of the gun barrel sent me staggering back, only to fall on my behind some feet away. With one hand clutching at his wound, the other with the pistol trained on me, he pulled himself to his feet.

'Bloody pirates,' he snarled through clenched teeth.

I saw his finger whiten on the trigger. I heard the hammer on the pistol snap forward and closed my eyes expecting the shot to come.

But it never did. And of course it didn't. There was indeed something unearthly about this man – his grace, his speed, his garb, his choice of weaponry – but he was still just a man, and no man can command the sea. Even he couldn't prevent his powder getting wet.

Lesson four: if you're going to ignore lessons one, two and three, it's probably best not to pull out a gun filled with wet powder.

His advantage lost, the killer turned and headed straight for the tree line, one arm still clutching his wounded stomach and the other warding off undergrowth as he crashed into it and out of sight. For a second I simply sat there, unable to believe my luck: if I was a cat then I'd have used up at least three of my nine lives, and that was just today.

And then without a second thought – well, maybe perhaps a *single* second thought, because, after all, I'd seen him in action and wound or no wound he was dangerous – I took off in pursuit. He had something I wanted. That hidden blade.

I heard him crashing through the jungle ahead of me so, heedless of the branches whipping my face and dancing over roots underfoot, I gave chase. I reached out to prevent myself being slapped in the face by a thick green leaf the size of a banjo and saw a bloody handprint on it. Good. I was on the right track. From further ahead came the sound of disturbed birds crashing through the canopy of trees, and I reflected that I hardly needed to worry about losing him – the whole jungle shook to the sound of his clumsy progress. His grace, it seemed, was no more, lost in the blundering fight for survival.

'Follow me, and I'll kill you,' I heard from ahead.

I doubted that. As far as I could see, his killing days were over.

And so it proved. I reached a clearing where he stood, bent over with the pain of his stomach wound. He'd been trying to decide which route to take but at the sound of me crashing out of the undergrowth turned to face me. A slow, painful turn, like an old man crippled with bellyache.

Something of his old pride returned, and a little fight crept into his eyes as there was a sliding noise and from his right sleeve sprouted the blade, which gleamed in the duskiness of the clearing.

It struck me that the blade must have inspired fear in his enemies, and that to inspire fear in your enemy was half the battle won. Make someone frightened of you, that was the key. Unfortunately, just as his killing days were over, so too was his ability to inspire dread in his foes. Exhausted and hunched over with pain as he was, his robes, hood and even the blade looked like the trinkets they were. I took no pleasure in killing him, and possibly he didn't even deserve to die. Our captain had been a cruel, ruthless man, fond of a flogging. So fond, in fact, that he was apt to let the cat out of the bag and administer them himself. And he'd enjoyed doing what he called 'making a man a governor of his own island', which in other words was marooning him. Nobody but his own mother was going to mourn our captain's passing. To all intents and purposes, the man with the robes had done us a favour.

But the man with the robes had been about to kill me as well. And the first lesson was that if you set out to kill someone you'd better finish the job.

He knew that, I'm sure, as he died.

Afterwards I rifled through his things. And yes, the body was still warm. And no, I'm not proud of it, but please don't forget, I was – *I am* – a pirate. So I rifled through his things. From inside his robes I retrieved a satchel.

Hmm, I thought. *Hidden treasure.*

But when I upended it on to the ground so the sun could dry the contents what I saw was … well, not treasure. An odd cube made of crystal, with an opening on one side – an ornament, perhaps? (Later I'd find out what it was, of course, then I'd laugh at myself for ever thinking it a mere *ornament.*) And some maps I laid to one side, as well as a letter with a broken seal that as I began reading I realized held the key to everything I wanted from this mysterious killer …

Señor Duncan Walpole,

I accept your most generous offer, and await your arrival with eagerness.

If you truly possess the information we desire, we have the means to reward you handsomely.

Though I do not know your face by sight, I believe I can recognize the costume made infamous by your secret order.

Therefore, come to Havana in haste. And trust that you shall be welcomed as a brother. It will be a great honour to meet you at last, señor; to put a face to your name and shake your hand as

I call you friend. Your support for our secret and most noble cause is warming.

Your most humble servant,
Governor Laureano Torres y Ayala

I read the letter twice. Then a third time for good measure.

Governor Torres of Havana, eh? I thought.

'Reward you handsomely', eh?

A plan had begun to form.

I buried Señor Duncan Walpole. I owed him that much at least. He went out of this world the way he'd arrived – naked – because I needed his clothes in order to begin my deception and, though I do say so myself, they were a perfect fit. I looked good in his robes. I looked the part.

Acting the part, though, would be another matter entirely. The man I was impersonating? Well, I've already told you of the aura that seemed to surround him. When I secured his hidden blade to my own forearm and tried to eject it as he had, well – it just wasn't happening. I cast my mind back to seeing him do it and tried imitating him. A *flick* of the wrist. Something special, obviously, to stop the blade engaging by accident. I flicked my wrist. I twisted my arm. I wriggled my fingers. All to no avail. The blade sat stubbornly in its housing. It looked both beautiful and fearsome but if it wouldn't engage it was no good to man nor beast.

What was I to do? Carry it around and keep trying? Hope I'd eventually chance upon its secret? Somehow I thought not. I had the feeling there was arcane knowledge attached to this blade. Found upon me, it could betray me.

With a heavy heart I cast it away then addressed the graveside I had prepared for my victim.

'Mr Walpole …' I said, 'let's collect your reward.'

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I came upon them at Cape Buena Vista beach the next morning: a schooner anchored in the harbour, boats brought ashore and crates offloaded and dragged on to the beach, where they'd been stacked, either by the dejected-looking men who sat on the sand with their hands bound, or perhaps by the bored English soldiers who stood guard over them. As I arrived a third boat was arriving, more soldiers disembarking and casting their eyes over the prisoners.

Why the men were tied up, I wasn't sure. They certainly didn't appear to be pirates. Merchants by the looks of them. Either way, as another rowing boat approached I was about to find out.

'The commodore's gone ahead to Kingston,' announced one of the soldiers. In common with the others he wore a tricorne and waistcoat, carried a musket. 'We are to commandeer this lubber's ship and follow.'

So that was it. The English wanted their ship. They were as bad as pirates themselves.

Merchants like to eat almost as much as they like to drink. Thus they tend towards the stout side. One of the captives, however, was even more florid-faced and plump than his companions. This was the 'lubber' the English were talking about, the man I came to know as Stede Bonnet, and at the sound of the word 'Kingston' he'd seemed to perk up, and he raised his head, which before had been contemplating the sand with the look of a man wondering how he'd got into this position and how he was going to get out.

'No, no,' he was saying, 'our destination is Havana. I'm just a merchant –'

'Quiet, you bleeding pirate!' an irate soldier responded by toeing sand into the wretched man's face.

'Sir,' he cringed, 'my crew and I have merely anchored to water and resupply.'

And then, for some reason known only to them, Stede Bonnet's companions chose that moment to make their escape. Or *try* to make their escape. Hands still tied, they scrambled to their feet and began a lurching run towards the tree line where I hid watching the scene. At the same time the soldiers, seeing the escape, raised their muskets.

Shot began zinging into the trees around me and I saw one of the merchants fall in a spray of blood and brain matter. Another went down heavily with a scream. Meanwhile one of the soldiers had placed the muzzle of his rifle at Bonnet's head.

'Give me one reason I shouldn't vent your skull,' he snarled.

Poor old Bonnet, accused of being a pirate, about to lose his ship, and now seconds away from a steel ball in the brain. He did the only thing a man in his position could do. He stammered. He spluttered. Possibly even wet himself.

'Um … um …'

And now I drew my cutlass and emerged from the tree line with the sun behind me. The soldier gaped. What I must have looked like as I stepped out of the glare of the sunshine with my robes flowing and cutlass swinging I don't know, but it was enough to give the rifleman pause. A second in which he hesitated. A second that cost him his life.

I slashed upwards, opening his waistcoat and spilling his guts to the sand, spinning around in the same movement and dragging my blade across the throat of another soldier who stood nearby. Two men dead in the blink of an eye and a third about to join them as I ran him through with my cutlass and he slid from my blade and died writhing on the beach. I snatched my dagger from my belt with my other hand, jammed it into the eye of a fourth, and he fell back with a shocked yell, blood gushing from the hilt embedded in his face, staining the teeth of his screaming mouth.

The soldiers had all loosed their shot at the escaping merchants, and though they weren't slow to reload they were still no match for a swordsman. That's the thing with soldiers of the Crown. They rely too much on their muskets: great for frightening native women, not so effective at close quarters with a scrapper who'd learnt his trade in the taverns of Bristol.

The next man was still bringing his musket to bear when I despatched him with two decisive strokes. The last of the soldiers was the first to get a second shot off. I heard it part the air by my nose and reacted with shock, hacking at his arm wildly until his musket dropped and he fell to his knees, pleading for his life with a raised hand until I silenced him with the point of my cutlass into his throat. He dropped with a gurgle, his blood flooded the sand around him, and I stood over his body with my shoulders heaving as I caught my breath, hot in my robes but knowing I had handled myself well. And when Bonnet thanked me, saying, 'By God's grace, sir, you saved me. A profusion of thanks!' it wasn't Edward Kenway the farmboy from Bristol he was thanking. I had started again. I was Duncan Walpole.

Stede Bonnet, it turned out, had not only lost his crew but had no skill for sailing. I had saved him from having his ship commandeered by the English, but to all intents and purposes I had commandeered it myself. We had one thing in common. We were both heading for Havana, and his ship was fast and he was talkative but good company, so we sailed together in what was a mutually beneficial partnership – for the time being at least.

As I steered I asked him about himself. What I found was a rich but fretful man, evidently attracted to more, shall we say, *questionable* ways of making money. For one thing, he constantly asked about pirates.

'Most hunt the Windward Passage between Cuba and Hispaniola,' I told him, suppressing a smile as I steered his schooner.

He added, 'I shouldn't worry about being waylaid by pirates, truth be told. My ship is small and I have nothing of immense value. Sugar cane and its yields. Molasses, rum, that sort of thing.'

I laughed, thinking of my own crew. 'There's not a pirate living who'd turn his back on a keg of rum.'

Havana was a low port surrounded by forest and tall palm trees, their fronds a lush green that wafted gently in the breeze, waving us in as our schooner sailed into dock. In the busy town white stone buildings with red-slate roofs looked dilapidated and weather-beaten, bleached by the sun and blasted by the wind.

We moored and Bonnet set about his business, the business being helping to maintain amicable links with our former enemies the Spanish, and doing it using that age-old diplomacy technique – selling them things.

He seemed to know the city, so rather than strike out alone I waited for his diplomacy mission to end then agreed to accompany him to an inn. As we made our way there it occurred to me that the old me, the Edward Kenway me, would have been looking forward to reaching the tavern. He'd have been getting thirsty right now.

But I had no urge to drink – and I mulled that over as we made our way through Havana, weaving through townsfolk who hurried along the sun-drenched streets, and watched by suspicious old folk who squinted at us from doorways. All I'd done was assume a different name and clothes, but it was as though I had been given a second chance at becoming … well … *a man*. As if Edward Kenway was a rehearsal from which I could learn my mistakes. But Duncan Walpole would be the man I'd always wanted to be.

We reached the inn, and where the taverns of Edward past's had been dark places with low ceilings and shadows that leapt and danced on the walls; where men hunched over tankards and spoke from the sides of their mouths, here,

beneath the Cuban sun, twinkled an outdoor tavern crowded with sailors who were leathery-faced and sinewy from months at sea, as well as portly merchants – friends of Bonnet, of course – and locals: men and children with handfuls of fruit for sale, women trying to sell themselves.

A dirty, drunken deckhand gave me the evil eye as I took a seat while Bonnet disappeared to meet his contact. Perhaps this sailor didn't like the look of me – after the Blaney business I was used to that kind of thing – or maybe he was a righteous man and didn't approve of the fact that I had swiped the ale of a sleeping drunk.

'Can I help you, friend?' I said over the lip of my newly acquired beaker.

The jack tar made a smacking sound with his mouth. 'Fancy meeting a Taffy deep in Dago country,' he slurred, 'I'm English meself, biding me time till the next war calls me to service.'

I curled my lip. 'Lucky old King George, eh? Having a pisspot like you flying his flag.'

That made him spit. 'Oi, skulk,' he said. The saliva gleamed on his lips as he leaned forward and huffed the sour smell of week-old booze over me. 'I've seen your face before, haven't I? You's mates with those pirates down in Nassau, ain't yer?'

I froze and my eyes darted to where Bonnet stood with his back to me, then around the rest of the inn. Didn't look like anybody had heard. I ignored the pisshead next to me.

He leaned forward, insinuating himself even further into my face. 'It is you, isn't it? It is …'

His voice had begun to rise. A couple of sailors at a table nearby glanced our way.

'It *is* you, isn't it?' Almost shouting now.

I stood, grabbed him, writhing from his seat, and slammed him against a wall. 'Shut your gob before I fill it with shot. You hear me?'

The sailor looked blearily at me. If he'd heard a word I'd said he showed no sign.

Instead he squinted, focused and said, 'Edward, isn't it?'

Shit.

The most effective way to silence a blabbermouth jack tar in a Havana tavern is a knife across the throat. Other ways include a knee in the groin and the method I chose. The headbutt.

I slammed my forehead into his face and his next words died on a bed of broken teeth as he slipped to the floor and lay still.

‘You bastard,’ I heard from behind me, and turned to find a second red-faced sailor. I spread out my hands. *Hey, I don’t want trouble.*

But it wasn’t enough to prevent the right-hander across my face. And next I was trying to peer through a thick crimson curtain of pain shooting across the back of my eyes as two more crewmates arrived. I swung and made contact and it gave me precious seconds to recover. That Edward Kenway side of me, buried so deep? I exhumed him now. Because wherever you go in the world, whether it’s Bristol or Havana, a pub brawl is a pub brawl. They say practice makes perfect and while I’d never claim to be perfect, the fighting skills honed during my misspent youth prevailed and soon the three sailors lay in a groaning heap of arms and legs and broken furniture fit only for kindling.

I was still dusting myself off when the cry went up. ‘Soldiers!’ And in the next moment I found myself doing two things: first, running full pelt through the streets of Havana in order to escape the beetroot-faced men with muskets; second, trying not to get lost.

I managed both and later rejoined Bonnet at the tavern, only to discover that not only had the soldiers taken his sugar but the satchel I’d taken from Duncan Walpole as well. The satchel I was taking to Torres. *Shit*.

The loss of Bonnet’s sugar I could live with. But not the satchel.

25

Havana's the kind of place where you can loiter without attracting much attention. And that's on a normal day. On a day they're hanging pirates, in the very square the executions are due to take place, then loitering's not only expected, it's bloody well encouraged. The alliance between England and Spain may well have been an uneasy one, but there were certain matters on which both countries agreed. One of them being: they both hated pirates. Another one: they both liked to see pirates hanged.

So on the scaffold in front of us three buccaneers stood with their hands tied, staring with wide, frightened eyes through the nooses before them.

Not far away was the Spaniard they called El Tiburón, a big man with a beard and dead eyes. A man who never spoke because he couldn't: a mute. I looked from him to the condemned men. Then found I couldn't look at them, thinking, *There but for the grace of God go I …*

We weren't here for them anyway. Bonnet and I stood with our backs to a weather-bleached stone wall, looking for all the world as though we were idly watching the world go by and awaiting the execution, and not at all interested in the conversation of the Spanish soldiers gossiping nearby. Oh no, not at all.

'Are you still keen to look over the cargo we confiscated last night? I hear there were some crates of English sugar.'

'Aye, taken from the Barbadian merchant.'

'Duncan,' said Bonnet from the side of his mouth, 'they're talking about my sugar.'

I looked down at him and nodded, grateful for the translation.

The soldiers went on to discuss last evening's brawl at the tavern. Meanwhile, from the stage a Spanish officer was announcing the execution of the first man, stating his crimes and ending by intoning, 'You are hereby sentenced to be hanged by the neck until dead.'

At his signal El Tiburón pulled the lever, the trapdoor opened, the bodies fell and the crowd went, 'Ooh'.

I forced myself to look at the three swinging corpses, finding that I held my breath just in case what I'd been told about the loose bowels was true. Those

bodies would be displayed in gibbets around the city. Bonnet and I had already seen such things on our travels. They had little tolerance for pirates here and wanted the world to know it.

I was hot in my robes but right now I was glad of the disguise.

We left, our expedition to the scaffold having given us the information we needed. The cargo was in the *castillo*. That, then, was where we needed to be.

26

The vast grey stone wall rose way above us. Did it really block out the sun or was it just an illusion? Either way we felt cold and lost in its shadow, like two abandoned children. I'll say this for the Cubans, or the Spanish, or whoever you'd say was responsible for building the grand Castillo de los Tres Reyes del Morro, they knew how to build an intimidating fortress. Around one hundred and fifty years old, it was built to last, too, and looked as though it would still be there in one hundred and fifty years' time. I looked from its walls out to sea and pictured it bombarded by the broadsides of a man-of-war. What impression would the steel balls of mounted guns make? I wondered. Not much.

Either way, I didn't have a man-of-war. I had a sugar merchant. So what I needed was a more covert way of gaining entry. The advantage I had was that nobody in their right mind actually *wanted* to be on the inside of those dark, brooding walls, for in there was where the Spanish soldiers tortured confessions from their prisoners and perhaps even performed summary executions. Only a fool would want to go in there, where the sun didn't shine, where nobody could hear you scream. Even so, you couldn't just walk right in. *'Oi, mate, you couldn't tell us where the loot room is, could you? I've lost a satchel full of important documents and a weird-looking crystal.'*

Thank God, then, for prostitutes. Not because I was feeling randy, but because I'd seen a way to get inside – inside the fortress, I mean. Those ladies of the night, who sat on a fortune, well, they had good reason to be on the other side of those walls, so who better to get us in?

'You need a friend, gringo? You need a woman?' said one, sidling up with a flurry of tits, ruby-red lips and smoky eyes full of promise.

I ushered her away from the castle walls.

'What's your name?' I asked.

'Name, señor?'

'Do you speak English?'

'No, no English.'

I smiled. 'But gold is a language we all speak, no?'

Yes, as it turned out, Ruth did speak gold. She was almost fluent in gold. And so was her friend, Jacqueline.

Bonnet had been hanging around, looking shifty. Introductions were made and a few minutes later we were walking, bold as brass, to the front gate of the castle.

At the top of the approach I looked back to where the hustle, bustle and heat of Havana seemed to recede, kept at bay by the forbidding stone and tall watchtowers of the *castillo*, which radiated a kind of malignancy, like the mythical monsters sailors said lived in the uncharted depths of the deepest oceans: fat and deadly. *Stop it*, I told myself. I was giving myself the heebie-jeebies. We had a plan. Now to see if it played out.

In the role of burly minder, I banged my fist on the wicket door and we waited for it to open. Two Spanish soldiers carrying bayoneted muskets stepped outside and gave us the long look up and down: me and Bonnet, with especially lascivious looks reserved for Ruth and Jacqueline.

I played my part. I looked tough. Ruth and Jacqueline played their parts. They looked sexy. Bonnet's job was to speak the lingo, some of which I could understand, the rest he filled me in on later.

'Hello,' he said. 'I'm afraid neither of my two lady friends speaks Spanish, thus I've been asked to speak for them, and my colleague here –' he indicated me – 'he is here to ensure the ladies' safety.'

(*Lie!* I held my breath, feeling as though there was a sign above our heads advertising our dishonesty. *Lie!*)

The two soldiers looked at the girls who, fortified with gold, not to mention several glasses of rum, preened and pouted so professionally that anybody would think they did it for a living. It wasn't enough to convince the guards, though, who were about to wave us away and let themselves be swallowed up once again by the squatting grey beast when Bonnet said the magic words: El Tiburón. The girls had been called for by El Tiburón, the executioner himself, he explained, and the guards paled, sharing a nervous look.

We'd seen him at work earlier, of course. It takes no skill whatsoever to pull a lever, but it does require a certain – how shall we say? – *darkness of character* to pull the lever that opens the trap and sends three men plummeting to their deaths. So it was that El Tiburón's name alone was enough to inspire fear.

With a wink Bonnet added that El Tiburón liked the girls from Portugal. And Ruth and Jacqueline, continuing to play their parts well, giggled and blew mock kisses and adjusted their bosoms flirtatiously.

'El Tiburón is the governor's right-hand man, his enforcer,' said one of the soldiers suspiciously. 'What makes you think he will be in the *castillo*?'

I swallowed. My heart nudged up against my ribcage and I cast Bonnet a sideways look. *So much for his information.*

'My dear man,' he smiled, 'do you really think this assignation would meet the approval of Governor Torres? El Tiburón would need new employment if the governor were to discover him consorting with prostitutes. And as for doing it on the governor's own property …'

Now Bonnet looked from side to side and the two soldiers craned to hear more secrets.

Bonnet continued. 'I need hardly say, gentlemen, that being in possession of this information puts you in a most *delicate* position. On the one hand, you now know things about El Tiburón – Havana's most dangerous man, let's not forget – which he would pay, or perhaps kill –' here he paused just enough to let this information sink in – 'in order to protect. Depending on how you want to conduct yourselves in possession of this information would no doubt dictate the level of El Tiburón's gratitude. Do I make myself clear, gentlemen?'

To me it sounded as though he was spouting twaddle, but it seemed to have the desired effect on the two sentries, who at last stood aside and let us in.

And in we went.

'The mess hall,' said one of the guards, indicating walkways that looked down upon the courtyard in which we now stood. 'Tell them you're looking for El Tiburón; they'll point you in the right direction. And tell these ladies to behave themselves lest you inadvertently reveal the true nature of your business here.'

Bonnet gave his best greasy smile, bowing as we moved past and giving me a sly nod at the same time. We left two thoroughly hoodwinked guards in our wake.

I left them to it as I climbed steps, hoping for all the world that I looked like I belonged in the fortress. At least it was quiet: apart from the sentries there were very few troops about. Most seemed to have congregated in the mess room.

Me, I headed straight for the loot room where I almost cheered to find the satchel with all the documents and the crystal present and correct. I pocketed it and glanced around. Bloody hell. For a loot room it was woefully empty of any actual loot. All there was, apart from a pouch containing a few gold coins (which went into my pocket), were crates of Bonnet's sugar. I looked at them. It occurred to me we had no contingency for their rescue. *Sorry, Bonnet, it will have to wait for another time*.

A few minutes later and I'd rejoined them; they'd decided not to risk the mess room and instead had been loitering on the walkways nervously awaiting my return. Bonnet was too relieved to see me back to ask about the sugar – that particular pleasure would have to wait until later – and wiping nervous sweat

from his brow he ushered us back along the passage and down the steps to the courtyard, where our friends the sentries shared a look as we approached.

‘I see. Back so soon …’

Bonnet shrugged. ‘We asked at the mess hall, but of El Tiburón there was no sign. Possibly there has been some mistake. Perhaps his desires have been satisfied elsewhere …’

‘We will tell El Tiburón that you were here, then,’ said one of the guards.

Bonnet nodded approvingly, ‘Yes, please do that, but remember, be discreet.’

The two guards nodded, and one even tapped the side of his nose. Our secret would be safe with them.

Later we stood on the port with Bonnet’s ship nearby.

I handed him the bag I’d filched from the loot room at the *castillo*. Seemed the decent thing to do – to make up for his lost sugar. I wasn’t all bad, you know.

‘Oh, it’s no great loss,’ he said, but took it anyway.

‘Will you stay long?’ I asked him.

‘For a few weeks, yes. Then back to Barbados, to the tedium of domesticity.’

‘Don’t settle for tedium,’ I told him. ‘Sail to Nassau. Live life as you see fit.’

By now he was halfway up the gangplank, his newly acquired crew readying themselves to set sail.

‘Haven’t I heard that Nassau is crawling with pirates?’ he laughed. ‘Seems a very tawdry place.’

I thought of it. I thought of Nassau.

‘No, not tawdry,’ I told him. ‘Liberated.’

He smiled. ‘Oh, God, that would be an adventure. But no, no. I’m a husband and a father. I have responsibilities. Life can’t be all pleasure and distraction, Duncan.’

For a moment I’d forgotten my assumed identity and felt the tremor of guilt. Bonnet had done nothing but help me. Quite what had possessed me, I wasn’t sure. Guilt, I suppose. But I told him.

‘Hey, Bonnet. The name’s Edward in truth. Duncan is only a handle.’

‘Ah …’ He smiled. ‘A secret name for your secret meeting with the governor …’

‘Yes, the governor,’ I said. ‘Right. I think I’ve kept him waiting long enough.’

27

I went straight to Governor Torres's residence, a vast mansion set behind steep walls and metal gates, well away from Havana's hubbub. There I told the sentries, 'Good afternoon. Mr Duncan Walpole of England to see the governor. I believe he is expecting me.'

'Yes, Mr Walpole, please enter.'

That was easy.

The gates squeaked, a hot summer's day sound, and I stepped through to be awarded with my first glance of how the other half lived. Everywhere were palm trees and short statues on plinths, and from somewhere the sound of running water – a marked contrast to the fortress: opulent where that had been grimy, gaudy where that had been forbidding.

As we walked the two sentries stayed a respectful but still watchful distance behind, and my limited Spanish picked up fragments of their gossip: apparently I was a couple of days late; apparently I was an *asesino*, an assassin, and there was something about the way they said the word that was odd. The way they stressed it.

I kept my shoulders back, chin held high, thinking only that I needed to continue the subterfuge for a short while longer. I'd enjoyed being Duncan Walpole – it had felt liberating to leave Edward Kenway behind, and there were times I'd considered saying goodbye for good. Certainly there were parts of Duncan I wanted to keep, souvenirs, keepsakes: his robes, for one, his fighting style. His bearing.

Right now, though, what I wanted most was his reward.

We came into a courtyard, which was vaguely reminiscent of the fortress, except while that was a stony drill square overlooked by shadowed walkways, this was an oasis of sculpture, lush-leaved plants and the ornate galleries of the *palacio* framing a sky of deep blue and a sun that smouldered in the distance.

There were two men already there. Both well dressed, men of class and distinction, I could tell. *More difficult to fool*. Close by them was a rack of weapons. One of them stood aiming a pistol at a target. The other cleaning another pistol.

At the sound of myself and the sentries entering the courtyard the shooter looked over, annoyed at the interruption, and then with a little shake of his shoulders composed himself, squinted along the line of the pistol and squeezed off a shot.

The sound rang around the courtyard. Applause came from startled birds. A tiny wisp of smoke rose from the dead centre of the target, which had rocked slightly on its tripod. The shooter looked to his companion with a wry smile, received an impressed eyebrow-raise in return, this the vocabulary of the well-to-do. And then they turned their attention to me.

You're Duncan Walpole, I told myself and tried not to wilt beneath their scrutiny. *You're Duncan Walpole. A man of danger. An equal. Here at the invitation of the governor.*

'Good afternoon, sir!' The man who had been cleaning the gun smiled broadly. He had long greying hair tied back, and a face that had spent many an hour in the sea breeze. 'Would I be correct in thinking you are Duncan Walpole?'

Remembering how Walpole had spoken. Cultured tones.

'I am indeed,' I replied, and I sounded so phony to my own ears that I half expected the gun-cleaner to point his pistol straight at me and order the guards to arrest me on the spot.

Instead he said, 'I thought as much,' and still beaming strode across the courtyard to offer me a hand that was as hard as oak. 'Woodes Rogers. A pleasure.'

Woodes Rogers. I'd heard of him, and the pirate in me paled, because Woodes Rogers was the scourge of my kind. A former privateer, he'd since declared a hatred of those who turned to piracy and pledged to lead expeditions aimed at rooting them out. A pirate such as Edward Kenway he'd like to see hanged.

But you're Duncan Walpole, I told myself, and met his eye as I shook his hand firmly. Not a pirate, oh no. Perish the thought. An equal. Here at the invitation of the governor.

The thought, comforting as it had been, faded in my mind as I realized that he'd fixed me with a curious gaze. At the same time he wore a quizzical half-smile, as though he'd had a thought and wasn't sure whether to let it go free.

'I must say, my wife has a terrible eye for description,' he said, evidently letting his curiosity get the better of him.

'I'm sorry?'

'My wife. You met her some years ago at the Percys' masquerade ball.'

'Ah, quite …'

'She called you "devilishly handsome". Obviously a lie to stoke my jealousy.'

I laughed as though in on the joke. Should I be offended he didn't think me devilishly handsome? Or just pleased the conversation had moved on?

Eyes on his gun I plumped for the latter.

Now I was being introduced to the second man, a dark Frenchman with a guarded look called Julien DuCasse, who was calling me the 'guest of honour' and talking about some 'order' I was supposed to join. Again I was referred to as an 'assassin'. Again it was with an odd emphasis I couldn't quite decode.

Asesino – assassin – *Assassin*.

He was querying the honesty of my 'conversion' to the 'order', and my mind returned to the wording of Walpole's letter: *Your support for our secret and most noble cause is warming.*

What secret and noble cause would that be, then? I wondered.

'I have not come to disappoint,' I said uncertainly. Tell the truth, I didn't have the foggiest what he was on about. What I wanted was to give the satchel with one hand and receive a bulging bag of gold with the other.

Failing that, I wanted to move on, because right now I felt as though my deception was likely to crumble at any second. In the end it was a relief when Woodes Rogers's face broke into a grin – the same grin he no doubt grinned at the thought of pirates' heads in hangmen's nooses – and he clapped me on the back and insisted I take part in the shooting.

Happy to oblige, anything to take their minds off me, I engaged them in conversation at the same time. 'How is your wife these days, Captain Rogers? Is she here in Havana?'

I held my breath, steeling myself against his next words, *'Yes! Here she is right now! Darling, you remember Duncan Walpole, don't you?'*

Instead he said, 'Oh, no. No, we've been separated these two years past.'

'Sorry to hear that,' I said, thinking what excellent news it was.

'I trust she is well,' he went on, a touch of wistfulness in his voice that sparked a brief thought of my own lost love, 'but … I wouldn't know. I have been in Madagascar some fourteen months, hunting pirates.'

So I had heard. 'You mean Libertalia, the pirate town?'

That was Libertalia in Madagascar. According to legend, Captain William Kidd had stopped there in 1697 and ended up leaving with only half his crew, the rest of them seduced by the lifestyle of a pirate utopia where the motto was 'for God and liberty', with the emphasis on liberty. Where they spared the lives of prisoners, kept killing to a minimum, shared all the spoils fairly, no matter your rank or standing.

It sounded too good to be true, and there were plenty who thought it was a mythical place, but I'd been assured it existed.

Rogers was laughing. ‘What I saw in Madagascar was little more than the aftermath of a sad orgy. A ruffians’ squat. Even the feral dogs seemed ashamed of its condition. As for the twenty or thirty men living there, I cannot say they were ragged, since most wore no clothes at all. They had gone *native*, as the saying goes …’

I thought of Nassau, where such low standards wouldn’t be tolerated – not before nightfall at least.

‘And how did you deal with their kind?’ I asked, the picture of innocence.

‘Very simply. Most pirates are as ignorant as apes. I merely offered them a choice … Take a pardon and return to England penniless but free men, or be hanged by the neck until dead. It took some work to dislodge the criminals there, but we managed it. In future, I hope to use the same tactics throughout the West Indies.’

‘Ah,’ I said, ‘I imagine Nassau will be your next target.’

‘Very astute, Duncan. Indeed. Point of fact … the moment I return to England I intend to petition King George with the hope of becoming his emissary in the Bahamas. As governor, no less.’

So that was it. Nassau *was* the next step. A place I had come to think of as my spiritual home was under threat – from the carriage gun, the musket ball or maybe just the scratch of a quill. But under threat all the same.

I managed to distinguish myself in the shooting and was feeling pretty pleased with myself all told. So once again my thoughts returned to the reward. As soon as I had my money I could return to Nassau, and once there warn Edward and Benjamin that the infamous Woodes Rogers had a Bahamas-shaped bee in his bonnet for our little pirate republic. That he was coming for us.

And then a box was opened, and I heard Rogers say, ‘Wonderful. You’re a crack shot, Duncan. As good with a pistol as with your wrist blade, I imagine.’

Wrist blade, I thought distantly. *Wrist blade?*

‘If only he had one,’ DuCasse was saying as I peered at several sets of hidden blades displayed in the box – blades like the one I had reluctantly discarded on the beach at Cape Buena Vista. ‘Duncan, where is your wrist blade? I have never seen an Assassin so ill-equipped.’

Again: assassin. As in: *Assassin*.

‘Ah, damaged, sadly, beyond repair,’ I replied.

DuCasse indicated the selection in the box. ‘Then have your choice,’ he purred. And was it his thick French accent or did he mean to make it sound more like a threat than an offer?

I wondered where the blades were from. Other assassins, of course. (But assassins or *Assassins*?) Walpole had been one, but had been meaning to convert.

A traitor? But what was this ‘order’ which he’d been planning to join?

‘These are souvenirs,’ Julien was saying.

Dead men’s blades. I reached into the box and drew one out. The blade shone and its fixings trailed against my arm. At which point it dawned on me. They wanted me to use it. They wanted to see me in action. Whether as a test or for sport it didn’t matter. Either way they wanted a display of proficiency in a weapon I’d never used before.

Immediately I went up from congratulating myself on having discarded the bloody thing (it would have given me away!) to cursing myself for not having kept it (I could have practised and been competent with it by now!).

I squared my shoulders in Duncan Walpole’s robes. An impostor. Now I had to be him. I had to really *be* him.

They watched as I strapped on the blade. A weak joke about being out of practice elicited polite but humourless chuckles. With it on I let my sleeve drop down over my hand and as we walked began to flex my fingers, adjusting my wrist and feeling for the tell-tale catch of the blade engaging.

Walpole’s blade had been wet that day we fought. Who knows – perhaps it really had been damaged. This one, greased and shined, would surely be more cooperative?

I prayed it would be. Imagined the looks on their faces if I simply failed to make it work.

‘Are you sure you are who you say you are?’

‘Guards!’

Instinctively I found myself seeking out the nearest escape route. And not only that, but wishing I’d just left the bloody satchel of documents where I’d found it, wishing I’d left Walpole well alone. What was wrong with life as Edward Kenway anyway? I was poor but at least I was alive. I could have been back in Nassau right now, planning raids with Edward and eyeing up Anne Bonny at the Old Avery.

Edward had warned me not to join Captain Bramah. From the moment I’d suggested it he’d told me Bramah was bad news. Why didn’t I bloody listen?

The voice of Julien DuCasse interrupted my thoughts.

‘Duncan –’ he pronounced it *dern-kern* – ‘would you indulge us with a demonstration of your techniques?’

I was being tested. Every question, every challenge they threw my way – it was all an attempt to force me to prove my mettle. So far I’d passed. Not with flying colours, but I’d passed.

But now we’d stepped outside the confines of the courtyard and I was greeted with what looked like a newly constructed practice area, tall palms lining either

side of a grassed avenue, with targets at one end and just beyond that what looked like an ornamental lake, shimmering like a plateful of blue sunshine.

Behind the tree line, shadows moved among the scaly trunks of the palm trees. More guards, in case I made a break for it.

'We put together a small training course in anticipation of your arrival,' said Rogers.

I swallowed.

My hosts stood to one side: expectant. Rogers still carried the pistol, held loosely in one hand, but his finger was on the trigger, and Julien rested his right palm on the hilt of his sword. Behind the trees the figures of the guards stood motionless, waiting. Even the chirruping of insects and birds seemed to drop away.

'It would be a shame to leave here without seeing you in action.'

Woodes Rogers smiled but his eyes were cold.

And just my luck, the only weapon I had I couldn't bloody use.

Doesn't matter. I can take them anyway.

To the old Bristolian scrapper in me they were just another pair of lairy twats outside a tavern. I thought of how I'd watched Walpole fight, with perfect awareness of his surroundings. How he could lay these two out, and then be upon the nearest guards before they had a chance to even raise their muskets. Yes, I could do that, catch them unawares …

Now was the time, I thought. *Now*.

I braced and drew back my arm to throw the first punch.

And the blade engaged.

28

‘Oh well done, Duncan,’ said Rogers, clapping, and I looked from him and DuCasse to my shadow cast on the grass. I had struck quite a pose with the blade engaged. What’s more, I thought I knew how I had done it. A tensing of muscle that came as much from the upper arm as the forearm …

‘Very impressive,’ said DuCasse. He stepped forward, held my arm with one hand that he used to release a catch, and then, very carefully, used the flat of his other palm to ease the blade back into its housing.

‘Now, let’s see you do it again.’

Without taking my eyes off him, I took a step back and assumed the same position. This time there was no luck involved, and even though I didn’t know quite what I was doing I had perfect confidence it would work. Don’t ask me how I knew. I just did. Sure enough: *snick*. The blade sprang from the support and glinted evilly in the afternoon sun.

‘A little noisy,’ I smiled, getting cocky now. ‘Ideally, you’d not hear a thing. Otherwise it’s fine.’

Their challenges were interminable but by the end I felt I was performing for the pleasure rather than their reassurance. Any tests were over. The guards had drifted away, and even DuCasse, who wore his wariness like a favoured old frock coat, seemed to have relaxed. By the time we left the makeshift training area he was talking to me like an old friend.

‘The Assassins have trained you well, Duncan,’ he said.

The Assassins, I thought. So that’s what this group were called. Walpole had been a member but intended to betray his brothers, lowdown scum-sucker that he obviously was.

Betray them for what? is the question.

‘You chose the perfect time to leave them behind.’

‘At great risk,’ enthused Rogers. ‘Betraying the Assassins is never good for one’s health.’

‘Well,’ I said, somewhat pompously, ‘neither is drinking liquor, but I am drawn to its dangers all the same.’

He chuckled as I turned my attention to DuCasse. ‘And what is your business here, sir? Are you an associate of the governor’s? Or an impending acquaintance like me?’

‘Ah, I am … How do you say? Weapons dealer. I deal in pilfered guns and armaments.’

‘A smuggler of sorts,’ piped up Rogers.

‘Guns, blades, grenadoes. Anything that may kill a man, I am happy to provide,’ clarified the Frenchman.

By now we had reached the terrace, where I first clapped eyes on Governor Torres.

He was about seventy years old, but not fat the way rich men get. Apart from a clipped goatee beard his face was brown and lined and topped with brushed-forward thinning white hair, and with one hand on the bowl of a long-stemmed pipe he peered through round spectacles at correspondence he held in his other hand.

He didn’t look up, not at first. All the looking was taken care of by the big bearded man who stood patiently at his right shoulder, his arms folded, as still as one of the courtyard statues and ten times as stony.

I recognized him at once, of course. The previous day I’d seen him send three pirates to their death. Why, that very morning I’d pretended to procure prostitutes in his name. It was the Spaniard, El Tiburón, and although by now I should have been accustomed to intense examination by my hosts, his eyes seemed to drill right through me. For a while, as his stare bore into me, I was absolutely certain that not only had he spoken to the guards at the *castillo* but that they had given him my detailed description, and that any second now he would raise a trembling finger, point at me and demand to know why I’d been at the fortress.

‘Grand Master Torres.’

It was Rogers who broke the silence.

‘Mr Duncan Walpole has arrived.’

Torres looked up and regarded me over the top of his spectacles. He nodded, then handed his letter to El Tiburón, and thank God he did, for it meant that at last El Tiburón tore his eyes away from me.

‘You were expected one week ago,’ said Torres, but without much irritation.

‘Apologies, governor,’ I replied. ‘My ship was set upon by pirates and we were scuttled. I arrived only yesterday.’

He nodded thoughtfully. ‘Unfortunate. But were you able to salvage from these pirates the items you promised me?’

I nodded, thinking, *One hand to give you the satchel, the other hand to take the money,* and from my robes I took the bag and dropped it on a low table by Torres's knees. He puffed on his pipe then opened the satchel and took out the maps. I'd seen the maps before, of course, and they didn't mean anything to me. Nor did the crystal for that matter. But they meant something to Torres all right. No doubt about it.

'Incredible,' he said in tones of wonderment, 'the Assassins have more resources than I had imagined …'

And now he reached for the crystal, squinting at it through his spectacles and turning it over in his fingers. This *ornament* or whatever it was … well – to him it was no ornament.

He placed the papers and crystal back into the satchel and crooked a hand for El Tiburón who stepped forward and took the satchel. With that, Torres reached for my hand to shake, pumping it vigorously as he spoke. 'It is a pleasure to meet you at last, Duncan,' he said. 'You are most welcome. Come, gentlemen.' He motioned to the others. 'We have much to discuss. Come …'

We began to move away from the terrace, all friends together.

Still no word about the bloody reward. *Shit*. I was getting deeper and deeper into something I wanted no part of.

29

We stood around a large table in a private room inside the main building: me, Torres, El Tiburón, DuCasse and Rogers.

El Tiburón, who remained at his master's shoulder, held a long, thin box, like a cigar box. Did I imagine it, though, or were his eyes constantly on me? Had he somehow seen through me, or been alerted? *'Sir, a strange man in robes was looking for you at the fortress earlier.'*

I didn't think so, though. Apart from him, everybody else in the room seemed relaxed, accepting drinks from Torres and chatting amiably while he made his own. Like any good host, he'd ensured his guests were holding full glasses first, but I wondered why he didn't have staff to serve them, and then thought I knew the answer: it was the nature of our business in this room. The atmosphere might well have been relaxed – at least it was for the time being – but Torres had been sure to post a sentry then close the door with a gesture that seemed to say *Anything said in this room is for our ears only*, the kind of gesture that was making me feel less reassured with each passing moment, wishing I'd taken note of the line in the letter about my support for their 'secret and most noble cause'.

I must remember that next time I'm considering becoming an impostor, I thought, *give noble causes a wide berth. Especially if they're* secret *noble causes.*

But now we all had our drinks so a toast was raised, Torres saying, 'Convened at last. And in such continental company … England, France, Spain … Citizens of sad and corrupted empires.'

At a wave from Torres El Tiburón moved across, opened the box he held and placed it on the table. I saw red-velvet lining and the gleam of metal from inside. Whatever it was, it looked significant and indeed it proved as Torres, his smile fading, the natural gleam of his eyes replaced by something altogether more serious, began what was obviously a ceremony of some importance.

'But you are Templars now,' he was saying, 'the secret and true legislators of the world. Please hold out your hands.'

The convivial atmosphere was suddenly solemn. Drinks were set down. I shuffled quickly to my side, seeing that the others had placed themselves at

intervals around the table. Next I did as I was asked and proffered my hand, thinking, *Templars* – so that's what they were.

And it seems odd to say now, but I relaxed – I relaxed in the belief that they were nothing more sinister than a secret society. A silly club like any other silly club, full of deluded, pompous fools, whose grandiose aims ('the secret and true legislators of the world' no less!) were hot air, just an excuse for bickering about meaningless titles and trinkets.

What were their petty concerns? I wondered. And found I didn't care. After all, why would I? As a pirate I'd renounced all law but pirate law. My freedom absolute. I was governed by rules, of course I was, but they were the rules of the sea and adhering to them was a matter of *need*, for survival, rather than the acquisition of status and the peacocking of sashes and baubles. What were their squabbles with the Assassins, I wondered, and found I couldn't give a fig about that either.

So yes, I relaxed. I didn't take them seriously.

Torres placed the first ring on DuCasse's finger. 'Mark and remember our purpose. To guide all wayward souls till they reach a quiet road.'

A second ring was placed on Rogers's finger. 'To guide all wayward desire till impassioned hearts are cooled.'

Hot air, I thought. Nothing but empty, meaningless statements. No purpose other than to award their speaker unearned authority. Look at them all, lapping it up, like it meant something. Silly men so deluded by a sense of their own importance that they were unable to see that it extended no further than the walls of the mansion.

Nobody cares, my friends. Nobody cares about your secret society.

Now Torres was addressing me, and he placed on my finger a third ring, saying 'To guide all wayward minds to safe and sober thought.'

Sober, I thought. That was a laugh.

And then I looked down at the ring he'd put on my finger and suddenly I was no longer amused. Suddenly I was no longer thinking of these Templars as a silly secret society with no influence outside their own homes, because on my finger was the same ring as worn by the East India Company's ship captain Benjamin Pritchard; the same ring worn by the man in the hood, the leader of the group who had burned my father's farmhouse, both of whom had warned me of great and terrible powers at work. And suddenly I was thinking that whatever squabbles these people had with the Assassins, then, well, I was on the side of the Assassins.

For now, I would bide my time.

Torres stood back. ‘By the father of understanding’s light let our work now begin,’ he said. ‘Decades ago the council entrusted me with the task of locating in the West Indies a forgotten place our precursors once called the Observatory. See here …’

On the table before him were spread out the documents from the satchel, placed there by El Tiburón.

‘Look upon these images and commit them to memory,’ added Torres. ‘They tell a very old and important story. For two decades now I have endeavoured to locate this Observatory … The place is rumoured to contain a tool of incredible utility and power. It houses a kind of armillary sphere, if you like. A device that would grant us the power to locate and monitor *every man and woman on earth*, whatever their location.

‘Only imagine what it would mean to have such power. With this device there would be no secrets among men. No lies. No trickery. Only justice. Pure justice. This is the Observatory’s promise. And we must take it for our own.’

So that, then, was when I first learnt of the Observatory.

‘Do we know its whereabouts?’ asked Rogers.

‘We will soon,’ replied Torres, ‘for in our custody is the one man who does. A man named Roberts. Once called a Sage.’

DuCasse gave a small scoffing laugh. ‘It has been forty-five years since anyone has seen an actual Sage. Can you be sure this one is authentic?’

‘We are confident he is,’ replied Torres.

‘The Assassins will come for him,’ said Rogers.

I looked at the documents spread out before us. Drawings of what looked like an ancient race of people building something – the Observatory presumably. Slaves breaking rocks and carrying huge stone blocks. They looked human, but not quite human.

One thing I did know – a plan was beginning to form. This Observatory, which meant so much to the Templars. What would it be worth? More to the point, what would it be worth to a man planning revenge on the people who had helped torch his childhood home?

The small crystal cube was still on the table. I puzzled over it, just as I had on the beach at Cape Buena Vista. Now I watched as Torres reached and picked it up, replying to Rogers at the same time. ‘Indeed, the Assassins will come for us but, thanks to Duncan and the information he has delivered, the Assassins won’t be a problem for much longer. All will be made clear tomorrow, gentlemen, when you meet the Sage for yourselves. Until then … let us drink.’

Our host indicated a drinks table, and while backs were turned I reached to the documents and pocketed a page of manuscript – a picture of the Observatory.

Just in time. Torres turned, handing glasses to the men.

‘Let us find the Observatory together, for with its power kings will fall, clergy will cower, and the hearts and minds of the world will be ours.’

We drank.

We drank together, though I know for sure we drank in honour of very different things indeed.

30

The next day I had been asked to meet my ‘fellow Templars’ at the city’s northern ports, where it was said the treasure fleet would be arriving with my reward, and we could discuss further schemes.

I nodded, keen to give the impression that I was an eager Templar, plotting with my new firm friends to do whatever it was that Templars plot to do – the small matter of being able to influence ‘every man and woman on earth’. In fact, what I intended to do, just between me and you, was pocket the money, make my excuses, whatever those excuses needed to be, and leave. I was looking forward to spending my money and sharing my newfound information with my confederates at Nassau, then finding the Observatory, reaping the rewards, helping the downfall of these Templars.

But first I had to collect my money.

‘Good morning, Duncan.’ I heard Woodes Rogers hailing me from the docks. It was a fresh morning in Havana, the sun yet to reach full temperature and a light breeze blowing in from the Gulf of Mexico.

I began following Rogers, then I heard a voice shout, ‘*Edward! Hello, Edward!’*

For a second or so I thought it was a case of mistaken identity, even found myself looking over my shoulder to see this ‘Edward’. Until I remembered. Edward was me. I was Edward. Stupid Edward. Who, from a misplaced sense of guilt, had admitted my secret to Havana’s biggest blabbermouth, Stede Bonnet.

‘I found a man to purchase my remaining sugar. Quite a coup I must say,’ he called across the harbour.

I waved back – *excellent news* – aware of Rogers’s eyes upon me.

‘He just called you Edward,’ said my companion. That same curious smile I’d seen yesterday played about his lips again.

‘Oh, that’s the merchant who sailed me here,’ I explained, with a conspiratorial wink. ‘Out of caution, I gave him a false name.’

‘Ah … Well done,’ said Rogers. But not convinced.

I was thankful to leave the main harbour behind when Rogers and I joined the same group of Templars who’d met at Torres’s mansion the day before. Hands

were shaken, the rings of our brotherhood, still fresh on our fingers, glinted, and we gave each other short nods. Brothers. Brothers in a secret society.

And then Torres led us to a line of small fishermen's huts, with rowing boats tethered in the water nearby. There was no one about, not yet. We had this small area of the harbour to ourselves, which was the intention, no doubt, as Torres guided us to the end, where guards waited at a small hut and inside, sitting on an upturned crate, with a beard and ragged clothes, in his eyes a dejected but defiant look, was the Sage.

I watched the faces of my companions change. Just as the conflict between defeat and belligerence seemed to play out on the face of the Sage, so the Templars appeared to struggle, too, and they returned his glare with a look that was a mix of pity and awe.

'Here he is,' said Torres, speaking quietly, almost reverently, whether he knew it or not, 'A man both Templars and Assassins have sought for over a decade.'

He addressed the Sage. 'I am told your name is Bartholomew Roberts. Is this so?'

Roberts, or the Sage, or whatever we were calling him today, said nothing. Merely stared balefully at Torres.

Without taking his eyes off the Sage, Torres opened a hand at shoulder level. Into his palm El Tiburón placed the crystal cube. The same crystal cube I'd wondered about. I was going to find out what it was now.

Torres, speaking to the Sage again, said, 'You recognize this, I think?'

Silence from Bartholomew Roberts – the Sage was saying nothing. Perhaps he knew what was coming next. For now Torres indicated again, and a second upturned crate was brought to him on to which he sat so that he faced the Sage, man to man, except that one of the men was governor of Havana and the other man was ragged and had wild hermit eyes and his hands were bound.

It was to those bound hands that Torres reached, bringing the crystal cube to bear, and then inserting it over the Sage's thumb.

The two men stared at each other for a moment or so. Torres's fingers seemed to be manipulating the Sage's thumb somehow, before a single droplet of blood filled the vial.

I watched, not quite sure what I was witnessing. The Sage seemed to feel no pain and yet his eyes went from one man to the next as though cursing each of us in turn, me included, and he fixed me with a stare of such ferocity that I found myself having to resist the impulse to shrink away.

Why on earth did they need this poor man's blood? What did it have to do with the Observatory?

‘According to the old tales, the blood of a Sage is required to enter the Observatory,’ said DuCasse in a whisper, as though reading my thoughts.

The operation was over and Torres stood up from his crate, a little shaky, with one hand holding the vial for all to see. Caught by the light the blood-filled crystal gave his hand a red glow.

‘We have the key,’ he announced. ‘Now we need only its location. Perhaps Mr Roberts will be eager to provide it.’

He waved guards forward. ‘Transfer him to my residence.’

And that was it. The ghastly procedure was over, and I was pleased to leave the strange scene behind as we began making our way back to the main harbour, where a vessel had arrived. The one containing the treasure, I hoped. I *sorely* hoped.

‘Such a fuss over one man,’ I said to Torres as we walked, trying to sound more casual than I felt. ‘Is the Observatory *really* such a grand prize?’

‘Yes, indeed,’ replied Torres, ‘the Observatory was a tool built by the precursor race. Its worth is without measure.’

I thought of the ancients I had seen in the pictures at the mansion. Torres’s precursor race?

‘I do wish I could remain to see our drama done,’ said Rogers, ‘but I must avail myself of these winds and sail for England.’

Torres nodded. That familiar twinkle had returned to his eyes. ‘By all means, captain. Speed and fortune to you.’

The two men shook hands. Brothers. Brothers in a secret society. And then Rogers and I did the same, before the legendary pirate-hunter turned and left, off to continue being the scourge of buccaneers everywhere. We would meet again, I knew. Though I hoped the day would come later rather than sooner.

By now one of the ship’s deckhands had arrived and handed Torres something that looked suspiciously like it might contain my money. Not that the bag seemed quite as hefty as I’d hoped.

‘I consider this the first payment in a long-term investment,’ said Torres, handing me the pouch – the suspiciously *light* pouch. ‘Thank you.’

I took it cautiously, knowing by the weight that there was more to come, and by more to come I mean more money as well as more challenges for me to face.

‘I would like you to be present for the interrogation tomorrow. Call around noon,’ said Torres.

So that was it. In order to collect the rest of my fee I needed to see the Sage terrorized further.

Torres left me and I stood there for a moment on the dock, deep in thought, before leaving to prepare. I had decided I was going to rescue the Sage.

And I wonder *why* I decided to rescue the Sage. I mean, why didn't I simply take what money I'd been given, show a clean pair of heels and fill the sails on a passage to Nassau in the north-east? Back to Edward, Benjamin and the delights of the Old Avery?

I'd like to say it was a noble desire to free the Sage, but there was a bit more to it than that. After all, he could help find this Observatory, this device to follow people around. And what would a thing like that be worth? Sell it to the right person and I would be rich, the richest pirate in the West Indies. Return to Caroline a rich man. So perhaps it was merely greed that made me decide to rescue him. Looking back, probably a mixture of the two.

Either way, it was a decision I'd shortly regret.

31

Night-time, and the walls of Torres's mansion formed a black border beneath a grey starless night. The chirping insects were at their loudest, almost drowning out the trickle of running water and the soft rattle of the palm trees.

With a quick look left and right – my approach had been timed to make sure no sentries were present – I flexed my fingers and jumped, pulled myself up to the top of the wall, then lay there for a second to control my breath and listen out for running feet, cries of 'hey!' and the swish of swords being drawn …

And then, when there was nothing – nothing apart from the insects, the water and the whisper of night wind among the trees, I dropped down to the other side and into the grounds of the governor of Havana's mansion.

Like a ghost I made my way across the gardens and into the main building, where I hugged the walls along the perimeter of the courtyard. On my right forearm I felt the comforting presence of my hidden blade and strapped across my chest were my pistols. A short sword hung from my belt beneath my robes and I wore my cowl over my head. I felt invisible. I felt lethal. I felt as though I was about to deliver a blow against the Templars and even though, no, freeing the Sage wasn't equal to the harm their brothers had done me, and it wasn't like this was going to even the score, it was a start. It was a first strike.

What's more, I'd have the location of the Observatory and could reach it before they did. And that was a far, far bigger blow. That would hurt. I'd think of how much it hurt while I was counting my money.

I'd had to make an informed guess as to where the governor kept his state prisons, but I'm pleased to say I was right. It was a small compound, separate from the mansion, where I found a high wall and …

That's odd. Why is the door hanging open?

I slid through. Flaming torches bracketed on the walls illuminated a scene of carnage. Four or five soldiers were dead in the dirt, gaping holes at their throats, pulverized meat at their chests.

Where the Sage had been kept, I had no idea. But one thing was beyond doubt: he wasn't here now.

I heard a sound behind me too late to stop the blow but in time to prevent it knocking me out, and I pitched forward, landing badly on the dirt, but having the presence of mind to roll at the same time. A pikestaff with my name on it was driven into the ground where I'd been. At the other end of it was a surprised soldier. I kicked myself up, grabbed his shoulders and span. At the same time I booted the shaft of the pikestaff and snapped it, then rammed his body on to it at the same time.

He flopped like a landed fish, impaled on the broken shaft of his own pikestaff, but I didn't stick around to admire his death throes. The second soldier was upon me, angry, the way you get when you see your friend die.

Now, I thought, *let's see if this works every time*.

Snick.

The hidden blade engaged and I met the steel of his blade with steel of my own, knocking his sword away and slashing open his throat with the backswipe. I drew the sword at my belt in time to meet a third attacker. Behind him were two soldiers with muskets. Close by was El Tiburón, his sword drawn but held at his hip as he watched the fight. I saw one of the soldiers grimace and it was a look I recognized, a look I've seen before from men on the deck of a ship lashed to mine.

He fired just as I drove both my sword and hidden blade into the soldier in front of me, pinning him with the blades and swinging him round at the same time. His body, already dead, jerked as the musket ball slammed into him.

I let my human shield go, plucking a dagger from his belt as he dropped and praying that my aim would be as good as it always had been, after countless hours at home spent tormenting tree trunks with throwing knives.

It was. I took out, not the first musketeer – he was already making a panicky attempt to reload – but the second, who fell with the knife embedded between his ribs.

In a bound I was over to the first one and punched him in the stomach with my blade hand, so that he coughed and died on the shaft. Blood beads described an arc in the night as I pulled the blade free and span to meet the attack of El Tiburón.

There was no attack, though.

Instead El Tiburón calmed the tempo of the fight, and rather than begin his attack straight away, simply stood and very casually tossed his sword from one hand to the other before addressing me with it.

Fine. At least there wouldn't be a lot of chat during this bout.

I snarled and went forward, blades cutting half-circles in the air, hoping to daze him, disorientate him. His expression hardly changed, and with fast

movements of his elbow and forearm he met my attack easily. He was concentrating on my left hand, the hand that held the sword, and before I even realized he was doing it, my cutlass went spinning from my bloody fingers to the dirt.

My blade now. He concentrated on it, seeming to know it was new to me. Behind him more guards had gathered in the courtyard and though I couldn't understand what they were saying it was obvious: that I was no match for El Tiburón; that my end was but a heartbeat away.

And so it proved. The last of his attacks ended with a smash of the knuckle guard across my chin, and I felt teeth loosen and my head spin as I sank, first to my knees, before pitching forward. Beneath my robes, blood sluiced my sides like sweat, and what little fight was left in me was leeched away by the pain.

El Tiburón came forward. A boot stepped on to my blade and held my arm in place, and dimly I wondered if the blade had a quick-release buckle, even though it would do me no good, as the tip of his sword nudged my neck ready for the final lethal strike …

'*Enough*,' came the cry from the compound door. Squinting through a veil of blood I saw the guards part and Torres step through, followed closely by DuCasse. The two Templars shouldered El Tiburón aside, and with the merest flicker of irritation in his eyes – the hunter denied his kill – the enforcer stepped away. I'll be honest. I wasn't sad to see him go.

I gasped ragged breath. My mouth filled with blood and I spat as Torres and DuCasse crouched, studying me like two medical men examining a patient. When the Frenchman reached for my forearm I half expected him to feel for my pulse but instead he disengaged the hidden blade, unclipped it with practised fingers then tossed it away. Torres looked at me, and I wondered if he really was as disappointed as he looked, or whether it was theatrics. He took hold of my other hand, removed my Templar ring and pocketed it.

'What is your true name, rogue?' said Torres.

Disarmed as I was, they let me pull myself to a sitting position. 'It's, ah … Captain Piss Off.'

Again I spat, this time close to DuCasse's shoe, and he looked from the gobbet of blood to me with a sneer. 'Nothing but a filthy peasant.' He moved to strike me, but Torres held him back. He had been looking around the courtyard at the bodies, as though trying to assess the situation.

'Where is the Sage?' he asked. 'Did you set him free?'

'I had nothing to do with that, much as I wish I did,' I managed.

As far as I was concerned the Sage had either been sprung by Assassin friends or staged a breakout himself. Either way, he was out – out of harm's way and in

possession of the one secret we all wanted: the Observatory location. And my trip was a wasted one.

Torres looked at me and must have seen the truth in my eyes. His Templar affiliations made him my enemy, but there was something in the old man I liked, or respected at least. Perhaps he saw something in me, a sense that maybe we weren't so different. Certainly one thing I knew: if the decision had been left to DuCasse I'd have been watching my guts drop to the compound floor. Instead, Torres stood up and signalled to his men. 'Take him to the ports. Send him to Seville with the treasure fleet.'

'To Seville?' queried DuCasse.

'Yes,' replied Torres.

'But we can interrogate him ourselves,' said DuCasse. I heard the cruel smile in his voice. 'Indeed … it would be a pleasure.'

'Which is *exactly* why I intend to entrust the job to our colleagues in Spain,' said Torres firmly. 'I hope this is not a problem for you, Julien?'

Even fogged by pain I could hear the irritation in the Frenchman's voice.

'*Non, monsieur*,' he replied.

Still, he took a great pleasure in knocking my lights out.

32

When I awoke I was on the floor of what looked like the lower deck of a galleon. A large galleon it was, the kind that looked like it was used to transport … people. My legs were gripped by iron bilboes – big, immovable manacles that were scattered all around the deck, some empty, some not.

Not far away I could make out more bodies in the gloom. More men back there, at a guess maybe a dozen or so, shackled just as I was, but in what sort of shape it was difficult to tell from the low groans and mumblings that reached my ears. At the other end of the deck was piled what I took to be the captives' possessions – clothes, boots, hats, leather belts, backpacks and chests. In among them I thought I saw my robes, still dirty and bloody from the fight in the prison compound.

You remember me saying how lower decks had their own smell? Well, this one had a different smell altogether. The smell of misery. The smell of fear.

A voice said, 'Eat it fast,' and a wooden bowl landed with a dull thump by my bare feet before the black leather boots of a guard retreated, and I saw sunlight from a hatch and heard the clip-clop of a ladder being climbed.

Inside the bowl: a dry flour biscuit and a splodge of oatmeal. Not far away sat a black man, and, like me, he was eyeing the food dubiously.

'You hungry?' I asked him.

He said nothing, made no move to reach for the food. Instead he reached to the manacles at his feet and began to work at them, on his face an expression of profound concentration.

At first I thought he was wasting his time, but as his fingers worked, sliding between his feet and the irons, his eyes went to me, and though he said nothing I thought I saw in them the ghost of painful experience. His hands went to his mouth and for a moment he looked like a cat cleaning itself, until the same hand dipped into the oatmeal, mixing the goo inside with saliva and then using it to lubricate his foot in the manacle.

I knew what he was doing now, and could only watch in admiration and hope as he continued to do it, making the foot more and more greasy until it was slippery enough to …

Try. He looked at me, silenced any encouragement before it even left my lips, then twisted and pulled at the same time.

He would have yelled in pain if he wasn't concentrating on keeping so quiet, and his foot when it came free of the leg iron was covered in a revolting mixture of blood and spit and oatmeal. But it was free. And neither of us wanted to eat the oatmeal anyway.

He glanced back up the deck towards the ladder and both of us steeled ourselves against the appearance of a guard, then he began working at the other foot and was soon free. Crouched on the wood with his head cocked, he listened as footsteps from above us seemed to move towards the hatch, then, thankfully, moved away again.

There was a moment in which I wondered if he might simply leave me there. After all, we were strangers; he owed me nothing. Why should he waste time and endanger his own bid for freedom by helping me?

But in the next instant, after a moment's hesitation – perhaps he wondered himself about the wisdom of helping me – he scrambled over towards me, checked the shackles, then hurried over to an unseen section of the deck behind me, returning with keys.

His name was Adewalé he told me as he opened the shackles. I thanked him quietly, rubbing my ankles and whispering, 'Now, what's your plan, mate?'

'Steal a ship,' he said simply.

I liked the sound of that. First, though, I retrieved my robes and hidden blade, as well as adding a pair of leather braces and a leather jacket to my ensemble.

Meanwhile my new friend Adewalé was using the keys to release the other prisoners. I snatched another set from a nail on the wall and joined him.

'There's a catch to this favour,' I told the first man I came to as my fingers worked at the key in his restraints, 'you're sailing with me.'

'I'd follow you to hell for this, mate …'

Now there were more men standing on the deck and free of shackles than there were still restrained, and perhaps those above had heard something because suddenly the hatch was flung open and the first of the guards thundered down the steps with his sword drawn.

'Hey,' he said, but 'hey' turned out to be his final word. I'd already fitted my hidden blade (and had a moment's reflection that though I had only been wearing it for such a short space of time, it still felt somehow familiar to me, almost as though I had been wearing it for years) and with a flick of my forearm had engaged the blade, then stepped forward and introduced the blade to the guard, driving it deep into his sternum.

It wasn’t exactly stealthy or subtle. And I stabbed him so hard that the blade punctured his back and pinned him to the steps until I wrenched him free. Now I saw the boots of a second soldier and the tip of his sword as reinforcements arrived and for this one I didn’t wait. Backhanded I sliced the blade just below his knees and he screamed and toppled, losing his sword, losing his balance, one of his lower legs cut to the bone and pumping blood to the deck as he joined his mate on the wood.

By now it was a full-scale mutiny, and the freed men ran to the piles of confiscated goods and liberated their own gear, arming themselves with cutlasses and pistols, pulling boots on. I saw squabbles breaking out – already! – over whose items were whose, but there was no time to play arbitrator. A clip around the ear was what it took and then our new team was ready to go into action. Above us we heard the sound of rushing feet and panicked shouting in Spanish as the guards prepared themselves for the uprising.

Just then, something else. The ship suddenly rocked by what I knew was a gust of wind. Across the deck I caught Adewalé’s eye and he mouthed something to me. One word: hurricane.

Again it was as though the ship had been rammed as a second gust of wind hit us. Now time was against us; the battle needed to be won fast, and we had to take our own ship, because these winds, furious as they were, were nothing – *nothing* – compared to the force of a full-scale hurricane.

You could time its arrival by counting the delay between the first gusts. You could see the direction the hurricane was coming from. And if you were an experienced seaman, which I was by now, then you could use the hurricane to your advantage. So as long as we set sail soon, we could outrun any pursuers.

Yes, that was it. The terror of the hurricane had been replaced by the notion that we could make it work in our favour. Use the hurricane; outrun the Spanish. A few words in Adewalé’s ear and my new friend nodded and began to spread news of the plan throughout the rest of the men.

They would be expecting us out of the main hatch. They’d be expecting an uncoordinated, haphazard attack through the hatch of the quarterdeck.

So let’s make them pay for underestimating us.

Directing some of the men to stay near the foot of the steps and make the noise of men preparing to attack, I led the rest to the stern, where we broke through into the infirmary, then stealthily climbed the steps to the galley.

In the next instant we poured out on to the main deck, and sure enough the Spanish soldiers stood unaware, their backs turned and their muskets trained on the quarterdeck hatch.

They were idiots. They were careless idiots, who had not only turned their backs on us, but brought muskets to a sword fight, and they paid for it with steel in their guts, and across their throats, and for a moment the quarterdeck was a battlefield as we ruthlessly pressed home the advantage our surprise attack gave us, until at our feet lay dead or dying Spaniards, while the last of them threw themselves overboard in panic, and we stood and caught our breath.

Though the sails were furled the ship rocked as it was punched by another gust of wind. The hurricane would be upon us any minute. Now on other ships along the harbour belonging to the treasure fleet we saw soldiers handing out pikes and muskets as they began to prepare themselves for our attack.

We needed a faster ship than this one and Adewalé had his eye on one, already leading a group of our men across the gangplank and to the quay. Soldiers on the harbour died by their blade. There was a crack of muskets and some of our men fell, but already we were rushing the next galleon beside us, a beautiful-looking ship – the ship I was soon to make my own.

And then we were up on it just as the sky darkened, a suitable backdrop for the battle and a terrifying augur of what was to come.

Wind whipped at us. Growing stronger now, hammering us in repeated gusts. The Spanish soldiers, you could see they were in disarray, as terrified of the oncoming storm as they were of the escaped prisoners, unable to avoid the onslaught of either.

The battle was bloody and vicious, but over quickly and the galleon was ours. For a moment I wondered if Adewalé would want to assume command; indeed he had every right to do so – this man had not only set me free, but led the charge that helped win us this boat. And if he did decide to captain his own ship I would have to respect that, find my own command and go my own way.

But no. Adewalé wanted to sail with me as quartermaster.

And I was more than grateful, not only that he was willing to serve under me, but that he chose not to take his skills elsewhere. In Adewalé I had a loyal quartermaster, a man who would never rise up against me in mutiny, provided I was a just and fair captain.

I knew that then at the beginning of our friendship, just as I know it now with all those years of comradeship between us.

(Ah, but the Observatory. The Observatory came between us.)

We set sail just as the masts unfurled and the first tendrils of the coming storm fattened our sails. Crosswinds battered us as we left the harbour and I glanced behind from my place at the tiller to see the remaining ships of the treasure fleet being assaulted by wind and rain. At first their masts swung crazily from side to side like out-of-control pendulums, then they were clashing as the storm hit.

Without ready sails they were sitting ducks and it gladdened my heart to see them knocked into matchwood by the oncoming hurricane.

Now the air seemed to grow colder and colder around us. Above I saw clouds gathering, scudding fast across the sky and blocking out the sun. Next we were lashed with wind and rain and sea spray. Around us the waves seemed to grow and grow: towering mountains of water with foaming peaks, every one of them about to drown us, tossing us from one huge canyon of sea to another.

The poultry were washed overboard. Men hung on to cabin doors. I heard screams as unlucky deckhands were snatched off the ship. The galley fire was extinguished. All hatches and cabin doors battened down. Only the bravest and most skilful men dared scale the ratlines to try to manage the canvas.

The foremast snapped and I feared for the main mast and the mizzen, but they held, thank God, and I gave silent praise for this fast, plucky ship that had been brought to us by fate.

The sky was a patchwork of black cloud that every now and then parted to allow rays of sunshine through, as if the sun was being kept prisoner behind them, as though the weather was taunting us. Still we kept going, with three men at the tiller and men hanging on to the rigging as though trying to fly a huge, abominable kite, desperately trying to keep us ahead of the storm. To slow down would be to surrender to it. To surrender to it would be to die.

But we didn’t die, not that day. Behind us the rest of the treasure fleet was smashed at port, but the one ship – just the one ship containing the freed prisoners – managed to escape and the men we had – a skeleton crew – pledged their allegiance to myself and Adewalé, and agreed with my proposal that we set sail immediately for Nassau. At last I was going back to Nassau, to see Edward and Benjamin, and rejoin the republic of pirates I had missed so much.

I was looking forward to showing them my ship. My new ship. I had christened it the *Jackdaw*.

33

September, 1715

‘You’ve named your new brig after a poxy bird?’

Any other man and I would have drawn my pistol or perhaps engaged my hidden blade and made him eat his words. But this was Edward Thatch. Not Blackbeard yet, oh no. He had yet to grow the face fur, which would give him his more famous moniker, but he still had all that braggadocio that was as much his trademark as the plaited beard and the lit fuses he would wear in it.

Benjamin was there too. He sat with Edward beneath the sailcloth awnings of the Old Avery, a tavern on the hill overlooking the harbour, one of my very favourite places in the world, and my first port of call on entering Nassau – a Nassau I was pleased to see had hardly changed: the stretch of purest blue ocean across the harbour, the captured ships that littered the shores, English flags flying from their masts, the palms, the shanty houses, the huge Fort Nassau that towered above us, its death’s head flag flapping in the easterly breeze. I tell a lie; it had changed. It was busier than it had been before. Some nine hundred men and women now made it their base, I discovered – seven hundred of them pirates. And that included Edward and Benjamin – planning raids and drinking, drinking and planning raids, six of one, half a dozen of the other.

Nearby was another pirate I recognized as James Kidd, who some said was the son of William Kidd, who sat by himself. But for now my attention went to my old shipmates, who both rose to greet me. Here, there were none of the formalities, the insistence on politeness and decorum that shackles the rest of society. No, I was given a proper pirate greeting, embraced in huge hugs by Benjamin and Edward, the pirate scourges of the Bahamas, but really soft old bears, with grateful tears in their eyes to see an old friend.

‘By God, you’re a sight for salty eyes,’ said Benjamin, ‘come you in and have a drink.’

Edward gave Adewalé a look. ‘Ahoy, Kenway. Who’s this?’

‘Adewalé, the *Jackdaw*’s quartermaster.’

And that was when Edward made his crack about the *Jackdaw*'s name. Neither of them had yet made mention of the robes I wore, but perhaps I had that pleasure to come. Certainly there was a moment, after the greeting, when they both gave me long, hard looks and I wondered whether those looks were as much to gawp at my clothes as to see the change in me, because the fact was that I had been but a boy when I first met them, but I had grown from a feckless, arrogant teenager, an errant son, a lovelorn but unreliable husband, into something else – a man scarred and made hard by battle, who was not quite so careless with his feelings, not so liberal with his emotions, a cold man in many respects, a man whose true passions were buried deep.

Perhaps they saw that, my two old friends. Perhaps they took note of that hardening of boy to man.

I was looking for men to crew my ship, I told them.

'Well,' said Edward, 'there's scores of capable men about, but use caution. A shipload of the king's sailors showed up a fortnight back, causing trouble and knocking about like they own the place.'

I didn't like the sound of that. Was it Woodes Rogers's work? Had he sent out an advance party? Or was there another explanation? The Templars. Looking for me maybe? Looking for something else? The stakes were high now. I should know. I'd done more than my fair share to increase them.

As it turned out, in recruiting more men for my ship I was to learn a little more about the presence of the English in the Bahamas. Men that Adewalé and I spoke to talked of seeing soldiers prancing around in the king's colours. The British wanted us out, well, of course they did, we were a thorn in His Majesty's side, a dirty great stain on the red ensign, but it felt as though there was, if anything, an increase in British interest. So it was that when I next met Edward, Ben and, joining us, James Kidd in the Old Avery, I was extra wary of unfamiliar faces and sure to speak out of earshot.

'Have you ever heard of a place called the Observatory?' I asked them.

I'd been thinking about it a lot. At its mention there was a flicker in James Kidd's eyes. I shot him a glance. He was young – about nineteen or twenty years old, I'd say, so a bit younger than I was, and, just like me, a bit of a hothead. So as Thatch and Hornigold shook their heads, it was he who spoke up.

'Aye,' he said, 'I've heard of the Observatory. An old legend, like Eldorado or the Fountain of Youth.'

I ushered them to a table where, with a look left and right, a check to see if any of the king's spies were in residence, I smoothed out the picture purloined from Torres's mansion and placed it on the table. A bit dog-eared but, still, there in front of us was an image of the Observatory and all three men looked at it

with interest, some with more interest than others. Some who pretended they were less interested than they really were.

'What have you heard?' I asked James.

'It is meant to be a temple or a tomb. Hiding a treasure of some kind.'

'Ah, rocks,' bellowed Edward. 'It's fairy stories you prefer to gold, is it?'

Edward – he'd have no part in trying to find the Observatory. I knew that from the start. Hell, I'd known that before I'd even opened my mouth. He wanted treasure he could weigh on scales; chests filled with pieces of eight, rusted with the blood of their previous owners.

'It's worth more than gold, Thatch. Ten thousand times above what we could pull off any Spanish ship.'

Ben was looking doubtful, too – matter-of-fact, the only ear I seemed to have belonged to James Kidd.

'Robbing the king to pay his paupers is how we earn our keep here, lad,' said Ben with an admonishing tone. He jabbed a grimy weather-beaten finger at my stolen picture. 'That ain't a fortune; it's a fantasy.'

'But this is a prize that could set us up for life.'

My two old shipmates, they were salt of the earth, the two very best men I'd ever sailed with, but I cursed their lack of vision. They spoke of two or three scores to set us up for months, but I had in mind a prize that would set us up for life! Not to mention making me a gentleman: a man of property and promise.

'Are you still dreaming on that strumpet back in Bristol?' jeered Ben when I mentioned Caroline. 'Jaysus, let go, lad. Nassau is the place to be, not England.'

And for a while I tried to convince myself that it was true, and that they were right, and that I should set my sights on more tangible treasures. During days spent drinking, planning raids, then carrying out those raids, drinking to their success and planning more raids, I had plenty of time to reflect on the irony of it all, how standing around the table with my Templar 'friends' I'd thought them deluded and silly and yearned for my pirate mates with their straight talking and free thinking. Yet here on Nassau, I found men who had closed their minds, despite appearances to the contrary, despite what they said and even the symbolism of the black flag, with which I was presented one afternoon when the sun beat down upon us.

'We fly no colours out here, but praise the lack of them,' said Edward as we looked out towards the *Jackdaw*, where Adewalé stood by the flagpole. 'So let the black flag signal nothing but your allegiance to man's natural freedoms. This one is yours. Fly it proud.'

The flag flapped gently in the wind and I was proud – I *was* proud. I was proud of what it represented and of my part in it. I had helped build something

worthwhile, struck a blow for freedom – *true freedom*. And yet there was still a hole deep in my heart, where I thought of Caroline, and of the wrong that had been done to me. You see, my sweet, I had returned to Nassau a different man. Those passions buried deep? I was waiting for the day to act upon them.

In the meantime there were other things to think about, specifically the threat to our way of life. One night found us sitting around a campfire on the beach, our ships, the *Benjamin* and the *Jackdaw*, moored offshore.

‘Here’s to a pirate republic, lads,’ said Thatch. ‘We are prosperous and free, and out of the reach of the king’s clergy and debt collectors.’

‘Near five hundred men now pledge their allegiance to the brethren of the coast in Nassau. Not a bad number,’ said James Kidd. He cast me a brief sideways glance I pretended not to notice.

‘True,’ burped Thatch, ‘yet we lack sturdy defences. If the king were to attack the town he’d trample us.’

I grasped the bottle of rum he handed to me, held it up to the moonlight to examine it for bits of floating sediment and then, satisfied, took a swig.

‘Then let us find the Observatory,’ I offered, ‘if it does what these Templars claim, we’ll be unbeatable.’

Edward sighed and reached for the bottle. They’d heard this from me a lot. ‘Not that *twaddle* again, Kenway. That’s a story for schoolboys. I mean *proper* defences. Steal a galleon, shift all the guns to one side. It would make a nice ornament for one of our harbours.’

Now Adewalé spoke up. ‘It will not be easy to steal a full Spanish galleon.’ His voice was slow, clear, thoughtful. ‘Have you one in mind?’

‘I do, sir,’ retorted Thatch drunkenly. ‘And I’ll show you. She’s a fussock she is. Fat and slow.’

Which was how we came to be launching an attack on the Spanish galleon. Not that I knew it then, of course, but I was about to run into my old friends the Templars again.

34

March, 1716

We set course south-east or thereabouts. Edward said he'd seen this particular galleon lurking around the lower reaches of the Bahamas. We took the *Jackdaw*, and as we sailed we found ourselves talking to James Kidd and quizzing him on his parentage.

'The bastard son of the late William Kidd, eh?' Edward Thatch was most amused to relate. 'Is that a true yarn you like spinning?'

The three of us stood on the poop deck and shared a spyglass like it was a blackjack of rum, trading it in order to peer through a wall of early-evening fog so thick it was like trying to stare through milk.

'So my mother told me,' replied Kidd primly. 'I'm the result of a night of passion just before William left London …'

It was difficult to tell from his voice if he was vexed by the question. He was different like that. Edward Thatch, for example, wore his heart on his sleeve. He'd be angry one second, cheerful the next. Didn't matter whether he was throwing punches or doling out drunken, rib-crushing bear hugs, you knew what you were getting with Edward.

Whatever cards Kidd was holding, he kept them close to his chest. I remembered a conversation we'd had a while back. 'Did you steal that costume from a dandy in Havana?' he'd asked me.

'No, sir,' I replied. 'Found this on a corpse … one that was walking about and talking shite to my face only moments before.'

'Ah …' he'd said, and a look had crossed his face, impossible to decipher …

Still, there was no hiding his enthusiasm when we finally saw the galleon we were looking for. 'That ship's a monster; look at the size of her,' said Kidd as Edward preened himself as though to say, *I told you so.*

'Aye,' he warned, 'and we cannot last long face-to-face with her. You hear that, Kenway? Keep your distance, and we'll strike when fortune favours us.'

'Under cover of darkness, most likely,' I said with my eye to the spyglass. Thatch was right. She was a beauty. A fine ornament for our harbour indeed, and

an imposing line of defence in its own right.

We let the galleon draw away towards a disruption of horizon in the distance that I took to be an island. Inagua Island, if my memory of the charts was correct, where a cove provided the perfect place for our vessels to moor, and the abundant plant and animal life made it ideal for re-stocking supplies.

Edward confirmed it. 'I know the place. A natural stronghold used by a French captain named DuCasse.'

'*Julien DuCasse?*' I said, unable to keep the surprise out of my voice. 'The Templar?'

'Name's right,' replied Edward, distracted. 'I didn't know he had a title.'

Grimly I said, 'I know the man. And if he sees my ship, he'll know it from his time in Havana. Meaning he may wonder who's sailing her now. I can't risk that.'

'And I don't want to lose that galleon,' said Edward. 'Let's think on it … and maybe wait till it's darker before hopping aboard.'

Later I took the opportunity to address the men, climbing the rigging and gazing down upon them gathered on the main deck, Edward Thatch and James Kidd among them. I wondered, as I hung there for a moment, waiting for silence to fall, whether Edward looked at me and felt proud of his young protégé, a man he had mentored in the ways of piracy. I hoped so.

'Gentlemen! As is custom among our kind we do not plunge headlong into folly on the orders of a single madman, but act according to our own collective madness!'

They roared with laughter.

'The object of our attention is a square-rigged galleon, and we want her for the advantage she shall bring Nassau. So I'll put it to the vote … All those in favour of storming this cove and taking the ship stomp and shout "Aye!" '

The men roared their approval, not a single voice of dissent among them, and it gladdened the heart to hear it.

'And those who oppose, whimper "Nay!" '

There was not a nay to be heard.

'Never was the king's council this unified!' I roared and the men joined in, and I looked down at James Kidd, and especially at Edward Thatch, and they beamed their approval.

Shortly after as we sailed into the cove I had a thought: I needed to be sure that Julien DuCasse was taken care of. If he saw the *Jackdaw*, and more to the point, if he saw me and then escaped, he could tell his Templar confederates where I was, and I didn't want that. Not if I still held out hope of locating the

Observatory, which, despite what my pals were saying, I did. I gave the matter some thought, mulling over the various possibilities, and in the end decided to do what had to be done: I jumped overboard.

Well, not straight away, I didn't. First I told Edward and James of my plans and then, when my friends had been told that I planned to go on ahead and surprise DuCasse before the main attack started, I jumped overboard.

I swam to shore, where I moved like a wraith in the night, thinking of Duncan Walpole as I did it, my mind going back to the evening I'd broken into Torres's mansion and dearly hoping that tonight didn't turn out the same way.

I passed clusters of DuCasse's guards, my limited Spanish picking up snippets of conversation as they moaned about having to hunt down supplies for the boat. Night was falling by the time I came to an encampment and crouched in the undergrowth, where I listened to a conversation from within the canvas of a lean-to. One voice I recognized in particular: Julien DuCasse.

I already knew DuCasse kept a manor house on the island, where he no doubt liked to relax after returning from his endeavours to control the world. The fact that he wasn't returning there now meant that this was but a fleeting visit to collect supplies.

Now just one problem. Inside the lean-to my former Templar associate was surrounded by guards. They were truculent, probably uncooperative guards, who were hacked off at having to collect stocks for the ship, not to mention feeling the sharp edge of Julien DuCasse's tongue. But they were guards all the same. I looked around at the encampment. On the opposite side was a fire that had burned down almost to the embers. Close to me were crates and barrels, and looking from them to the fire I could see that they had been placed there deliberately. Sure enough, when I crabbed over and had a better look what I saw were kegs of gunpowder. I reached behind my neck, where I'd stowed my pistol to keep it dry. My powder was wet, of course, but access to powder was no longer a problem.

In the middle of the encampment stood three soldiers. On guard, supposedly, but in actual fact mumbling something I couldn't hear. Cursing DuCasse probably. Other troops were coming and going and adding to the pile of supplies: firewood mainly, kindling, as well as scuttlebuts that slopped with water drawn from a watering hole nearby. Not exactly the feast of wild boar and fresh spring water DuCasse was hoping for I'd wager.

Staying in the shadows, and with one eye on the movement of the troops, I crept close to the kegs and gouged a hole in the bottom one, big enough to fill my hands with gunpowder and create a little trail as I crept round the edge of the compound until I was as close to the fire as I dared. My line of gunpowder led in

a half-circle from where I crouched back to the kegs. At the other side of that circle was the lean-to where Julien DuCasse sat, drinking and dreaming of grand Templar plans to take over the world – and shouting abuse at his recalcitrant men.

Right. I had fire. I had a trail of gunpowder leading from the fire through the undergrowth and to the kegs. I had men waiting to be blown up and I had Julien DuCasse awaiting our moment of reckoning. Now all I needed to do was time things so that none of the clodhopping troops would see my makeshift fuse before it could detonate the powder.

Crouching I moved to the fire then flicked a glowing ember on to the tail of the gunpowder fuse. I steeled myself for the sound it made – it seemed so loud in the night – and thanked God the soldiers were making so much noise. And then, as the fuse fizzed away from me, I hoped I hadn't inadvertently broken the line of the fuse; hoped I hadn't accidentally trickled the gunpowder into anything wet; hoped none of the soldiers would arrive back just at the very instant that …

And then one did. He carried a bowl full of something. Fruit, perhaps. But either the smell or the noise alerted him and he stopped at the edge of the clearing and looked down at his boots just as the sizzle-burn of gunpowder trail ran past his feet.

He looked up and his mouth formed an O to shout for help as I snatched a dagger out of my belt, pulled my arm back and threw it. I was grateful once again for those wasted afternoons vandalizing trees back home at Bristol and thanked God as the knife hit him somewhere just above the collarbone – not an especially accurate shot, but it did the job. So instead of shouting the alarm he made a muted, strangulated sound and slumped forward to his knees, with his hands scrabbling at his neck.

The men in the clearing heard the noise of his body falling, his bowl of fruit tumbling, the fruit rolling, and turned to see its source. All of a sudden they were alert, but it didn't matter, because even as they pulled their muskets from their shoulders and a shout went up they had no idea what was about to happen.

I don't suppose they knew what hit them. I'd turned my back, put my hands over my ears and curled up into a ball as the explosion tore across the clearing. Something hit my back. Something that was soft and wet, which I didn't particularly want to think about. From further away I heard shouts and knew there would be more men arriving at any moment, so I turned and ran into the clearing, past blown-up bodies of soldiers in various states of mutilation and dismemberment, most of them dead, one of them pleading for death, and through thick black smoke that filled the clearing, embers floating in the air.

DuCasse emerged from the tent, swearing in French, shouting for someone, anyone, to put out the fire. Coughing, spluttering, he waved his hand in front of his face to clear smoke and choking particles of flaming soot and peered into the fog.

And standing in front of him he saw me.

And I know that he recognized me because he said so. ‘You’ was the only word he said before I drove my blade into him.

My blade hadn’t made a sound.

‘You remember the gift you gave me?’ It made a slight sucking noise as I pulled it from his chest. ‘Well, it answers just fine.’

‘You son of a whore.’ He coughed and blood speckled his face. Around us rained the flaming shot like satanic snow.

‘As bold as a musket ball, and still half as sharp,’ he managed as the life drained from him.

‘I’m sorry about this, mate. But I can’t risk you telling your Templar friends about me still kicking around.’

‘I pity you, buccaneer. After all you have seen, after all we showed you of our Order, still you embrace the life of an ignorant and aimless rogue.’

Round his neck I saw something I hadn’t seen before. A key on a chain. I yanked it and it came away easily in my fingers.

‘Is petty larceny the extent of your ambition?’ he mocked. ‘Have you no mind to comprehend the scope of ours? All the empires on earth, abolished! A free and opened world, without parasites like you.’

He closed his eyes, dying. His last words were, ‘May the hell you find be of your own making.’

Behind me I heard men crashing into the clearing and knew it was time to leave. In the distance I could hear more shouts and the sounds of battle and knew that my shipmates had arrived and that the cove and galleon would soon be ours and that the night’s work would soon be over. And as I disappeared into the undergrowth I thought about DuCasse’s final words: *May the hell you find be of your own making.*

We would see about that, I thought. We would see.

Part Three

35

May, 1716

It was two months later, and I was in Tulum on the eastern coast of the Yucatán Peninsula. My reason for being there? The ever-mysterious James Kidd, and what he had showed me in San Inagua Island.

He had been waiting, I now realize. Waiting for his moment to get me alone. After the death of DuCasse, the theft of his galleon and the … well, let's just say 'disposal' of the rest of the Frenchman's men, an operation that boiled down to either 'join us and become a pirate' or 'enjoy your swim', Thatch had sailed for Nassau with the Spanish galleon, taking most of the men with him.

Myself, Adewalé and Kidd had remained behind with some vague idea of how we might utilize the cove. What I had in mind, of course, was relaxing on its beaches and drinking until the supplies of rum were dry, and then returning to Nassau. *Oh, you constructed the fortified harbour without me. What a shame I missed the opportunity to help.* Something like that.

What Kidd had in mind – well, who could tell? At least until he approached me that day, told me he had something to show me, led me to the Mayan stones.

'Odd-looking things, aren't they?' he said.

He wasn't wrong. From a distance they'd looked like a collection of rubble, but up close were actually a carefully arranged formation of strangely carved blocks.

'Is this what they call Mayan?' I asked him, staring at the rock closely. 'Or is it Aztec?'

He looked at me. He wore that same penetrating, quizzical look he always seemed to when we spoke. It made me feel uncomfortable, if I'm honest. Why did I always get the feeling he had something to say, something to tell me? Those cards he held close to his chest, there were times I wanted to wrench his hands away and look at them for myself.

Some instinct, though, had told me that I'd find out in good time. That instinct would be proved right, it would turn out.

‘Are you good with riddles, Edward?’ he asked me. ‘Puzzles and ponderings and the like?’

‘I’m no worse than the next man,’ I said carefully. ‘Why?’

‘I think you have a natural gift for it. I’ve sensed it for some time, in the way you work and think. The way you understand the world.’

Now we were getting to it. ‘I’m not so sure about that. You’re talking in riddles now, and I don’t understand a word.’

He nodded. Whatever he had to tell me it wasn’t going to appear all at once. ‘Clamber on top of this thing here, will you? Help me solve something.’

Together we scrambled to the top of the rocks where we crouched. When James put a hand to my leg I looked down at it, just as tanned, weathered and worn as that of any pirate, with the same latticework of tiny cuts and scars earned at sea. But smaller, the fingers slightly tapered, and I wondered what it was doing there. If … *But no. Surely not.*

And now he was speaking, and he sounded more serious than before, like a holy man in contemplation.

‘Concentrate and focus all your senses. Look past shadow and sound, deep into matter, until you see and hear a kind of shimmering.’

What was he going on about? His hand gripped my leg harder. He urged me to concentrate, to focus. His grip, in fact, his whole manner, brooked no disbelief, banishing my reluctance, my resistance …

And then – then I saw it. No, I didn’t *see* it. How can I explain this? I *felt it* – *felt it* with my eyes.

‘Shimmering,’ I said quietly. It was in the air around me – all around me – a more vivid version of something I had experienced before, sitting in the farmyard at home in Hatherton, late at night when, in a dream, my mind roaming free, it was as if the world had suddenly become that bit brighter and more clear. I had been able to hear things with extra clarity, see things ahead I hadn’t been able to see before, and here was the funny thing: as though there was contained within me a huge bank, a huge vault of knowledge awaiting my access, and all I needed to open it was the key.

And that was it, sitting there, with Kidd’s hand gripping my leg.

It was as though I had found the key.

I knew why I’d felt different all those years ago.

‘You understand?’ hissed Kidd.

‘I think so. I’ve seen its like before. Glowing, like moonlight on the ocean. It’s like using every sense at once to see sounds and hear shapes. Quite a combination.’

‘Every man and woman on earth has in them a kind of intuition hidden away,’ Kidd was saying as I gazed about myself, like a man suddenly transported to another world. A blind man who could suddenly see.

‘I’ve had this sense most of my life,’ I told him, ‘only I thought it related in some way to my dreaming, or the like.’

‘Most never find it,’ said Kidd, ‘others it takes years to tease out. But for a rare few it comes as natural as breathing. What you feel is the light of life. Of living things past and present. The residue of vitality come and gone. Practice. Intuition. Any man’s senses can be tuned well past what he is born with. If he tries.’

After that, we’d parted, with arrangements to meet in Tulum, which is why I found myself standing in the baking heat trying to talk to a native woman who stood by what looked like a pigeon coop and who squinted up at me when I arrived.

‘You keep these things as pets?’ I asked.

‘Messengers,’ she replied in faltering English. ‘This is how we communicate between these islands. How we share information … and contracts.’

‘Contracts?’ I asked, thinking, *assassins. Assassins’ contracts?*

She told me Kidd was waiting for me at a temple and I moved on. How did she know? And why, as I walked, did I get the feeling that they were awaiting my arrival? Why, as I passed through a village made up mainly of low huts, did I feel as though the villagers were all talking about me, gaping blankly at me when I looked their way? Some wore colourful flowing robes and jewellery, and carried spears and sticks. Some had bare chests and wore breechcloths, were daubed with markings and wore strange adornments, bracelets made of silver and gold and beaded necklaces with bones for pendants.

I wondered if they were like the people from my world, bound by notions of rank and social class. And just as back in England a high-class gentleman might be recognized by the cut of his clothes and quality of his walking cane, here those at the top of the scale simply wore finer robes, more ornate jewellery and had more intricate daubing.

Perhaps Nassau really was the only place that was truly free. Or perhaps I was fooling myself about that.

And then it was as if the jungle fell away and rising high, high above me in a pyramid shape was a vast tiered Mayan temple, with huge flights of steps rising through the centre of the layers of stone.

Standing gulping in the undergrowth I noticed the freshly cut branches and stems around me. A path had been recently cleared and I followed it until I reached a doorway in the foot of the temple.

In there? Yes. In there.

I felt along its sides and with effort dragged it across until I was able to squeeze inside, into what looked like an entrance chamber, but not as dark as I'd expected. As though somebody had already lit …

'Captain Kenway,' said a voice from the shadows. It was a voice I didn't recognize, and in the next instant my pistol was drawn as I span and peered into the dark. My new enemies had the advantage of surprise, though, and the pistol was knocked from my hand at the same moment as I was grabbed and pinned from behind. The flickering torch lit hooded, shadowy figures holding me in place, while in front of me two men had appeared from the shadows. One of them was James Kidd. The other, a native, hooded like the others, his face indistinct in the shadows. And for a second he simply stood and stared at me. He stared at me until I stopped struggling and cursing James Kidd, and had calmed down, and then he said, 'Where is the assassin Duncan Walpole?'

I threw a glance at Kidd. With his eyes he assured me everything was all right, that I was in no danger. Why I trusted him, I didn't know. He'd tricked me into this meeting, after all. But I relaxed, nevertheless.

'Dead and buried,' I said of Walpole, and I didn't see the native man in front of me bridle with anger so much as sense it. Quickly I added, 'After he tried to kill me.'

The native gave a short, thoughtful nod. 'We are not sorry to see him gone. But it is you who carried out his final betrayal. Why?'

'Money was my only aim,' I said impudently.

He moved in closer, giving me a good look at him. A native man, he had dark hair and piercing serious eyes within a brown lined face adorned with paint. He was also very angry.

'Money?' he said tightly. 'Should I find comfort in that?'

'He has the sense, mentor,' said James, stepping in.

The sense. That much I understood. But now this: *mentor*. How was this native chief *mentor* to James?

Mention of my sense seemed to calm the native chief – the man I would later come to know as Ah Tabai.

'James tells me you met the Templars in Havana,' he said. 'Did you see the man they call the Sage?'

I nodded.

'Would you recognize his face if you saw it again?' asked Ah Tabai.

'I reckon so,' I said.

He thought and then seemed to reach a decision. 'I must be certain,' he said quickly, and then he and his men dissolved into the shadows, leaving me alone

with James, who gave me a sharp look and raised a don't-say-a-word finger before I could remonstrate with him.

Instead he took a torch, grimacing at the dwindling, meagre light it provided, then bent to move into a narrow passageway that went further into the temple. There the ceiling was so low that we were almost bent double as we made our way along, both conscious of what might be lurking within this thousands-of-years-old structure, what surprises might lie in store. Whereas in the chamber our words had echoed, now they were deadened by the walls – damp rock that seemed to crowd in on us.

'You walked me blind and backwards into this mess, Kidd! Who the bloody hell was that jester back there?'

He called over his shoulder. 'Ah Tabai, an Assassin, and my mentor.'

'So you're all part of some daffy religion?'

'We are Assassins and we follow a creed. But it does not command us to act or submit … Only to be wise.'

He came out of the low tunnel into another passageway, but one that did at least let us stand upright.

'A creed,' I said as he walked. 'Oh do tell. I'd love to hear it.'

' "Nothing is true, everything is permitted." This is the world's only certainty.'

' "Everything is permitted?" I like that – I like the sound of that. Thinking what I like and acting how I please –'

'You parrot the words, Edward, but you do not understand them.'

I gave a short laugh. 'Don't get all haughty with me, Kidd. I followed you as a friend and you tricked me.'

'I saved your skin bringing you here, man. These men wanted you dead for consorting with Templars. I talked them out of it.'

'Well, cheers for that.'

'Aye, cheers.'

'So it's you lot them Templars have been chasing, then?'

James Kidd chuckled. 'Until you came along and mucked things up, it was us chasing them. We had them running scared. But they have the upper hand now.'

Ah …

As we kept walking along passageways I could hear strange sounds around us.

'Is someone in here with us?'

'It's possible. We're trespassing.'

'Someone's watching us?'

'I don't doubt it.'

Our words dropped like a stone, echoing around the walls of the temple. Had Kidd been in here before? He didn't say, but seemed to know how to operate the

doors that we came to, then the stairways and bridges, climbing up and up, until we reached the final door.

‘Whatever’s waiting at the end of this path had better be worth my time,’ I said, irritated.

‘That’ll depend on you,’ he replied mysteriously.

Next thing we knew, the stones beneath our feet gave way and we plunged to water below.

36

The way was blocked by rubble – another challenge – so we swam underwater until at last, just when I had begun to wonder if I could hold my breath a second longer, we broke the surface of water and found ourselves in a pool at one end of another large chamber.

We moved on, out of this chamber and through into the next where we came upon a bust displaying a face. A face I recognized.

'Jesus,' I exclaimed. 'That's him. The Sage. But this thing must be hundreds of years old.'

'Older still,' said Kidd. He looked from me to the bust. 'You're certain it's him?'

'Aye, it's the eyes that mark him.'

'Did the Templars say why they wanted this Sage?'

With distaste I remembered. 'They drew some of his blood into a little glass cube.'

The cube you gave them, I recalled, but felt no guilt. Why should I?

'Like this one?' Kidd was saying. In his hands was another vial.

'Yes. They meant to ask him about the Observatory, too, but he escaped.'

The vial had disappeared back into the depths of Kidd's pouch. He seemed to consider something before turning away from the bust of the Sage. 'We've finished here.'

We returned, finding a new set of steps through the temple's innards until we were heading towards what looked like a door. As it slid away I saw sunlight for the first time in what felt like hours, and in the next moment was gulping down fresh air, and instead of cursing the heat of the sun as usual, was thankful for it after the clammy cold of the temple's interior.

Ahead Kidd had stopped and was listening. He threw a look back and motioned me to hush my noise and stay out of sight. What was going on I couldn't tell, but I did as I was told, then followed him. Slowly and quietly we inched forward to where we found Ah Tabai crouched out of sight behind a rock – out of sight because in the distance we could hear the unmistakable Cockney bray of English soldiers at work.

Behind the boulder we waited in silence and Ah Tabai turned his penetrating stare upon me. ‘The statue in the temple,’ he whispered, ‘was that the man you saw in Havana?’

‘Spitting likeness, aye,’ I whispered back.

Ah Tabai turned back to watch the soldiers over the edge of the boulder. ‘And it seems another Sage has been found,’ he said to himself. ‘The race for the Observatory begins anew.’

Was it wrong of me to feel a thrill? I was part of this now.

‘Is that why we’re whispering?’ I said.

‘This is your doing, Captain Kenway,’ said Ah Tabai quietly. ‘The maps you sold the Templars have led them straight to us. And now the agents of two empires know exactly where we operate.’

Kidd was about to step forward to engage the soldiers. No doubt he felt more comfortable hacking down English soldiers than natives, but Ah Tabai was already stopping him. With one hand restraining Kidd his eyes went to me. ‘They have taken Edward’s crew as well,’ he said. I started. *Not the crew. Not Adewalé and my men.* But Ah Tabai, with a final reproachful look my way, slipped away. Behind him he’d left what was unmistakably a blowpipe that Kidd picked up.

‘Take this,’ he said, handing it to me. ‘You’ll attract no attention and take fewer lives.’ And as he gave me a few tips on how to use it I wondered, Was this part of some new challenge? Or was it something new? Was I being trained? Evaluated?

Let them try, I thought darkly. *I’m nobody’s man but my own. Answerable only to myself and to my conscience. Rules and baubles? Not for me, thanks.*

They could stuff their creed where the sun don’t shine as far as I was concerned. Besides, why would they even want me? This *sense*, perhaps? My skill in battle!

Doesn’t come cheap, gentlemen, I thought as I came to the perimeter of the clearing where my crew had been deposited, sitting back-to-back with their hands bound. Good lads, they were giving the English soldiers all kinds of grief: ‘Let me up, tosspot, and face me like a soldier!’

‘If only you knew what was coming to you … I think you’d pack your kits and run.’

I fitted the first of my darts into the blowpipe. I could see what needed to be done: take out the English soldiers one by one, try to even up the numbers a little. A poor unfortunate native gave me just the diversion I needed. Howling outrage he staggered to his feet and tried to run. With him went the attention of the soldiers, grateful for the sport, gleefully fitting their muskets to their

shoulders and firing. *Crack. Crack.* Like snapping branches in the forest. There was laughter as he crashed down in a haze of crimson, but they didn't notice that one of their number folded silently into the undergrowth, too, his hand clutching at the blowpipe dart protruding from his neck.

As the guards returned to the clearing I crossed the path behind them and at the same time spat a second dart at the soldier bringing up the rear. I span on my heel and caught him as he fell, and as I dragged his body into the bush, I thanked God for my rowdy men. They had no idea of my presence but couldn't have been more helpful if I'd primed them.

A soldier swung round. 'Hey,' he said, his friend nowhere to be seen. 'Where's Thompson?'

Hidden in the undergrowth I fitted the next dart and raised the pipe to my lips. Took a quick breath and puffed out my cheeks just as Kidd had shown me. The dart pierced him below the jawbone and he probably thought he'd been bitten by a mosquito – right up until the second he lost consciousness.

Now we were in business. From my vantage point in the bushes I counted. Three men dead, six still alive, and if I could take out a couple more before the remaining guards worked out they were being picked off, well, then I thought I could take the rest myself. Me and my hidden blade.

Did this make me an Assassin now? Now that I was behaving and thinking like one? After all, hadn't I pledged to fight the Templars for what happened in Hatherton?

My enemy's enemy is my friend.

No. I'm my own man. Answer to no one but myself. No creed for me. I'd had years of wanting to be free of convention. I wasn't about to give all that up.

By now the soldiers were looking around themselves. They'd begun to wonder where their comrades were. And I realized I didn't have the luxury of picking another one off. I had to take them all out myself.

Six against one. But I had the advantage of surprise, and as I leapt from within the undergrowth I made it my first order of business to swipe my blade across the ropes that bound Adewalé. Behind me he scrambled to find a weapon of his own. My blade was in my right hand, my pistol held in my left. Positioned between two men with my arms out straight, I pulled the trigger of the pistol and slashed with my right hand at the same time, bringing my arms to cross in front of me. One man died with a metal ball ploughing through his chest, the other with a gaping throat wound.

I dropped the empty pistol, pivoted, snatched a new pistol from my belt and uncrossed my arms at the same time. Two new targets, and this time the blade's backswipe sliced open a man's chest, while I shot a fourth man in the mouth. I

met a sword blow with a parry from the blade, and then a soldier came forward with bared teeth giving me no time to snatch my third pistol. For a moment we traded blows, and he was better than I had expected, better than I had dared hope he would be, because while I wasted precious seconds bettering him, his comrade was looking along the barrel of his musket at me, ready to pull the trigger. I dropped to one knee, jabbed upwards with the blade and sliced into the swordsman's side.

Dirty trick. Nasty trick.

There was even something of the outraged English sense of honour in his agonized howl of anguish and pain as his legs gave way beneath him and he came thumping to the ground, his sword swinging uselessly and not enough to prevent my blade punching up underneath his jaw and through the roof of his mouth.

A dirty trick. A nasty trick. And a stupid one. Now I was on the ground (never go down in a fight) with my blade wedged in my opponent. A sitting duck. My left hand scrabbled to find my third pistol, but unless his musket misfired because the powder was wet I was dead.

I looked over to him, saw him do the about-to-fire face.

A blade appeared from his chest as Adewalé ran him through.

I breathed a sigh of relief as he helped me up, knowing I'd been close – *this close* – to death.

'Thank you, Adé.'

He smiled, waved my thanks away, and together our gaze went to the soldier. His body rose and fell with his last breaths, and one hand twitched before it went still, and we wondered what might have been.

37

Not long later the men were free, and James and I stood on the beach at Tulum – a Tulum once again in the hands of natives, rather than soldiers or slavers – looking out to sea. With a curse he handed me his spyglass.

‘Who’s out there?’ I asked. A huge galley cruised along the horizon, getting more and more distant with each passing second. I could just about make out men on deck, and one in particular seemed to be ordering the others around.

‘See that mangy old codger?’ he said. ‘He’s a Dutch slaver called Laurens Prins. Living now like a king in Jamaica. Bastard’s been a target for years. Bloody hell, we nearly had him!’

Kidd was right. This slave trader had been in Tulum but was now well on his way to safety. He considered his mission a failure, no doubt. But at least he’d escaped with his liberty.

Another Assassin none too pleased was Ah Tabai, who joined us wearing a face so serious I couldn’t help but laugh.

‘By God, you Assassins are a cheery bunch, eh? All frowns and furrowed brows.’

He glared at me. ‘Captain Kenway. You have remarkable skill.’

‘Ah, thanks, mate. It comes natural.’

He pursed his lips. ‘But you are churlish and arrogant, prancing around in a uniform that you have not earned.’

‘Everything is permitted,’ I laughed. ‘Isn’t that your motto?’

The native man might have been old but his body was sinewy and he moved like a man much younger. But his face could have been carved from wood, and in his eyes was something truly dark, something both ancient and ageless. I found myself unnerved as he gave me the full benefit of his stare, and for a moment I thought he might say nothing, simply make me wilt in the heat of his contempt.

Until at last he broke the ghastly silence. ‘I absolve you of your errors in Havana and elsewhere,’ he said, ‘but you are not welcome here.’

And with that he left, and in his wake James shot me a look. ‘Sorry, mate, wish it were otherwise,’ he said, then left me alone to ponder.

Bloody Assassins, I thought. They were just as bad as the other lot. The self-righteous sanctimonious attitude they had. We're this, we're that. Like the priests back home who used to wait outside taverns and curse you for being a sinner and called on you to repent. Who wanted you to feel *guilty* all the time.

But the Assassins didn't burn your father's farm, did they? I thought. *It was the Templars who did that.*

And it's the Assassins who showed you how to use the sense.

With a sigh I decided I wanted to smooth things over with Kidd. I wasn't interested in the path he wanted me to take. But being asked. Being considered suitable. There was something to be said for that.

I found him by the same pigeon coop where I'd met the native woman earlier. There he stood, tinkering with his hidden blade.

'Cheery bunch of mates you've got,' I offered.

Though he frowned, a light in his eyes betrayed that he was pleased to see me.

Nevertheless, he said, 'You deserve scorn, Edward, prancing about like one of us, bringing shame to our cause.'

'What's that, your cause?'

'He tested his blade – in and out, in and out – and then turned his eyes on me.

'To be blunt … we kill people. Templars and their associates. Folks who'd like to control all the empires on earth … Claiming they do it in the name of peace and order.'

Yes, I'd come across those sort of people before. These people who wanted jurisdiction of everyone on earth – I had broken bread with them.

'Sounds like DuCasse's dying words,' I said.

'You see? It's about power really. About lording over people. Robbing us of liberty.'

And that – liberty – was something I held very, very dear indeed.

'How long have you been one of these Assassins?' I asked him.

'A couple of years now. I met Ah Tabai in Spanish Town and there was something about him I trusted, a sort of wisdom.'

'And is all of this his idea? This clan?'

Kidd chuckled. 'Oh no, the Assassins and Templars have been at war for thousands of years, all over the world. The natives of this new world had similar philosophies for as long as they've been here and when Europeans arrived our groups sort of … matched up. Cultures and religions and languages keep folks divided … but there's something in the Assassin's Creed that crosses all boundaries. A fondness for life and liberty.'

'Sounds a bit like Nassau, don't it?'

'Close. But not quite.'

I knew when we parted that I’d not seen the last of Kidd.

38

July, 1716

As the pirates of Nassau finished their rout of Porto Guarico's guards, I stepped into the fort's treasure room and the sound of clashing swords, the crackle of musket fire and the screams of the dead and dying faded behind me.

I shook blood from my blade, enjoying the look of surprise my presence brought to the face of its only occupant.

Its only occupant being Governor Laureano Torres.

He was just as I remembered him. Spectacles perched on his nose. Neatly clipped beard and twinkling, intelligent eyes that recovered easily from the shock of seeing me.

And behind him, the money. Just as had been promised by Charles Vane …

The plan had been hatched two days ago. I'd been at the Old Avery. There were other taverns in Nassau, of course, and other brothels, too, and I'd be lying if I said I didn't avail myself of both, but it was to the Old Avery that I returned, where Anne Bonny the barmaid would serve drinks (and there was no one prettier who ever bent to a bung hole with a tankard in her hand than Anne Bonny), where I'd spent so many happy hours in appreciation of that fine posterior, roaring with laughter with Edward and Benjamin, where for the hours we spent drinking there it was as though the world could not touch us and where, since returning to Nassau from Tulum, I found I'd rediscovered my thirst.

Oh yes. Just like those old days back in Bristol, the more dissatisfied I was, the thirstier I became. Not that I realized it at the time, of course, not being as prone to putting two and two together as I should have been. No, instead I just drank to quench that thirst and work up an even bigger one, brooding on the Observatory, and how it figured in my plans to get rich and strike at the Templars; brooding on James Kidd and Caroline. And I must have looked as though I was deep in a brown study that particular day, for the first thing that the pirate known as Calico Jack Rackham said to me was, 'Oi, you, why the long look? Are you falling in love?'

I looked at him with bleary eyes. I was drunk enough to want to fight him; too drunk to do anything about it. And, anyway, Calico Jack stood by the side of Charles Vane, the two of them having just arrived on Nassau, and their reputation preceded them. It came on the lips of every pirate who passed through Nassau. Charles Vane was captain of the *Ranger*, and Calico Jack his quartermaster. Jack was English but had been brought up in Cuba, so he had a hint of the swarthy South American about him. As well as the bright calico gear that had given him his nickname, he wore big hoop earrings and a headscarf that seemed to emphasize his long brow. It might sound like the pot calling the kettle black, but he drank constantly. His breath was always foul with it; his dark eyes heavy and sleepy with it.

Vane, meanwhile, was the sharper of the two, in mind and in tongue, if not in appearance. His hair was long and unkempt and he wore a beard and looked haggard. Both were armed with pistols on belts across their chests, and cutlasses, and were smelly from months at sea. Neither was the type you'd hurry to trust: Calico Jack, as dippy as he was tipsy; Vane on a knife edge, like you were always one slip of the tongue away from sudden violence. And not averse to ripping off his own crew either.

Still, they were pirates, both of them. Our kind.

'You're welcome to Nassau, gents,' I told them. 'Everyone is who does his fair share.'

Now, one thing you'd have to say about Nassau, specifically about the upkeep of Nassau, was that as housekeepers we made good pirates.

After all, you have enough of that when you're at sea, when having your ship spick and span is a question of immediate survival. They don't call it shipshape for nothing. So on dry land, when it's not really a question of survival – not immediate survival anyway – but more the sort of thing you feel you *should* do … What I'm saying is, the place was a pit: our grand Nassau Fort crumbled, great cracks along its walls; our shanty houses were falling down; our stocks and stores were badly kept and in disarray, and as for our privies – well, I know I've not exactly spared you the gory details of my life so far, but that's where I draw the line.

By far the worst of it was the smell. No, not from the privies, though that was bad enough, let me tell you, but a stench hung over the whole place, emanating from the stacks of rotting animal hides pirates had left on the shore. When the wind was blowing the right way – oh my days.

So you can hardly blame Charles Vane when he looked around and, though it was rich coming from a man who smelled like a man who'd spent the last month

at sea, which is exactly what he was, said, ‘So this is the new Libertalia? Stinks the same as every squat I’ve robbed in the past year.’

It’s one thing being rude about your own hovel; it’s a different kettle of fish when someone else does it. You suddenly feel defensive of the old place. Even so, I let it ride.

‘We was led to believe Nassau was a place where men did as they please,’ snorted Calico Jack. But before I could answer salvation arrived in the form of Edward Thatch, who with a bellow that might have been greeting but could just as well have been a war cry, appeared at the top of the steps and burst on to the terrace, as though the Old Avery was a prize and he was about to pillage it.

A very different-looking Edward Thatch it was, too, because to his already impressive head of hair he had added a huge black beard.

Ever the showman, he stood before us with his hands spread. *Behold*. Then tipped me a wink and moved into the centre of the terrace, taking command without even trying. (Which is funny, when you think on it, because for all our talk of being a republic, a place of ultimate freedom, we did still conform to our own forms of hierarchy, and with Blackbeard around there was never any doubt who was in charge.)

Vane grinned. Away with his scowl went the tension on the terrace. ‘Captain Thatch, as I live and breathe. And what is this magnificent muzzle you’ve cultivated?’

He rubbed a hand over his own growth as Blackbeard preened.

‘Why fly a black flag when a black beard will do?’ laughed Thatch.

That was the moment, in fact, that his legend was born. The moment he took the name Blackbeard. He’d go on to plait his face fuzz. When he boarded ships he inserted lit fuses into it, striking terror in all who saw him. It helped make him the most infamous pirate, not just in the Bahamas, not just in the Caribbean, but in the whole wide world.

He was never a cruel man, Edward, though he had a fearsome reputation. But like Assassins, with their robes and vicious blades springing from secret places, like Templars and their sinister symbols and their constant insinuations about powerful forces, Edward Thatch, Blackbeard as he came to be known, knew full well the value of making your enemies shit their breeches.

Now, it turned out that the ale, the sanctuary and the good company weren’t the only reasons we’d been graced with the presence of Charles Vane and Calico Jack.

‘The word is the Cuban governor himself is fixing to receive a mess of gold from a nearby fort,’ said Vane when we’d availed ourselves of tankards and lit our pipes. ‘Until then, it’s just sitting there, itching to be took.’

And *that* was how we found ourselves laying siege to Porto Guarico …

Well, the fight had been bloody, but short. With every man tooled up and our black flags flying we brought four galleons to the bay and hammered the fortress with shot, just to say we'd arrived.

Then we dropped anchor, launched yawls then waded through the shallows, snarling and shouting battle cries, our teeth bared. I got my first look at Blackbeard in full flight, and he was indeed a fearsome sight. For battle he dressed entirely in black, and the fuses in his beard coughed and spluttered so that he seemed to be alive with snakes and wreathed in a terrifying fog.

There's not many soldiers who won't turn tail and run at the sight of that charging up the beach towards them, which is what a lot of them did. Those brave souls who remained behind to fight or die, they did the latter.

I took my fair share of lives, the blade on my right hand as much a part of me as my fingers and thumbs, my pistol blasting in my left. When my pistols were empty I drew my cutlass. There were some of our men who had never seen me in action before, and you'll forgive me for admitting there was an element of showmanship in my combat, as I span from man to man, cutting down guards with one hand, blasting with the other, felling two, sometimes three, at a time; driven, not by ferocity or bloodlust – I was no animal, there was little savagery or cruelty to what I did – but by skill, grace and dexterity. There was a kind of artistry to my killing.

And then, when the fort was ours, I entered the room where Laureano Torres sat smoking his pipe, overseeing the money count, two soldiers his bodyguards.

It was the work of a moment for his two soldiers to become two dead soldiers. He gave me a look of scorn and distaste as I stood in my Assassin's robes – slightly tatty by now but still a sight to see – and my blade clicked back into place beneath my fist. The blood of his guards leaked through the sleeve.

'Well hello, Your Excellency,' I said. 'I had word you might be here.'

He chuckled. 'I know your face, pirate. But your name was borrowed the last time we spoke.'

Duncan Walpole. I missed him.

By now Adewalé had joined us in the treasure room, and as his gaze went from the corpses of the soldiers to Torres, his eyes hardened, perhaps as he remembered being shackled in one of the governor's vessels.

'So,' I continued, 'what's a Templar Grand Master doing so far from his *castillo*?'

Torres assumed a haughty look. 'I'd rather not say.'

'And I'd rather not cut yer lips off and feed 'em to ya,' I said cheerily.

It did the trick. He rolled his eyes but some of his smugness had evaporated. ‘After his escape from Havana we offered a reward for the Sage’s recapture. Today someone claims to have found him. This gold is his ransom.’

‘Who found him?’ I asked.

Torres hesitated. Adewalé put his hand to the hilt of his sword and his eyes burned hatefully at the Templar.

‘A slaver by the name of Laurens Prins,’ sighed Torres. ‘He lives in Kingston.’

I nodded. ‘We like this story, Torres. And we want to help you finish it. But we’re going to do it *our* way. Using you and your gold.’

He had no choice, and he knew it. Our next stop was Kingston.

39

So it was that some days later myself and Adewalé found ourselves roasting in the heat of Kingston as we shadowed the governor on his way to his meeting with Prins.

Prins, it was said, had a sugar plantation in Kingston. The Sage had been working for him but Prins had got wind of the bounty and thought he could make the sale.

Storm the plantation, then? *No*. Too many guards. Too high a risk of alerting the Sage. Besides, we didn't even know for certain he was there.

Instead we wanted to use Torres to buy the man: Torres would meet Prins, give him half the gold and offer the other half in return for the deliverance of the Sage; Adewalé and I would swoop in, take the Sage, whisk him off and then prise out of him the location of the Observatory. Then, we would be rich.

Simple, eh? What could go wrong with such a well-wrought plan?

The answer, when it came, came in the shape of my old friend James Kidd.

At the port Torres was greeted by Prins, who was old and overweight and sweating in the sun, and the two of them walked together, talking, with two bodyguards slightly in front of them, two behind.

Would Torres raise the alarm? Perhaps. And if he did, then Prins surely had enough men at his command to overpower us easily. But if that happened, Torres knew that my first sword slash would be across his throat. And if that happened, none of us would see the Sage again.

The funny thing is, I didn't *see* him. Not at first. It was as though I sensed him or that I became *aware* of him. I found myself looking around, the way you do if you smell burning when you shouldn't. *What's that smell? Where's that coming from?*

Only then did I see him. A figure who loitered in a crowd at the other end of the pier, part of the background but visible to me. A figure who, when he turned his face, I saw who it was. James Kidd. Not here to take the air and see the sights by the look of him. Here on Assassin business. Here to kill … who? Prins? Torres?

Jesus. We kept close to the harbour wall as I led Adewalé over, grabbed Kidd and dragged him into a narrow alleyway between two fishing huts.

'Edward, what the hell are you doing here?' He writhed in my grip but I held him easily. (And I'd think back to that later – how easily I was able to pin him to the hut wall.)

'I'm tailing these men to the Sage,' I told him. 'Can you hold off until he appears?'

Kidd's eyebrows shot up. 'The Sage is here?'

'Aye, mate, he is, and Prins is leading us straight to him.'

'Jaysus.' He pulled a frustrated face but I wasn't offering him a choice. 'I'll stay my blade for a time – but not long.'

Torres and Prins had moved off now and we had no choice but to go after them. I followed Kidd's lead and got some on-the-spot Assassin training in the art of stealth. And it worked, too. Like a dream. By staying at a certain distance we were able to remain out of sight and pick up on snippets of conversation, like Torres getting peeved at being made to hang on.

'I grow tired of this walk, Prins,' he was saying, 'we must be close by now.'

As it turned out we were. But close to what? Not to Prins's plantation, that much was certain. Ahead was the dilapidated wooden fencing and odd, incongruous arched entrance of what looked like a graveyard.

'Yes, just here,' Prins answered. 'We must be on equal footing you see? I'm afraid I don't trust Templars any more than you must trust me.'

'Well, if I'd known you were so skittish, Prins, I'd have brought you a bouquet of flowers,' Torres said with forced humour, and with a last look around he entered the graveyard.

Prins laughed. 'Ah, I don't know why I bother … For the money, I suppose. Vast sums of money …' His voice had tailed off. With a nod we slipped inside the cemetery behind them, keeping low and using the crooked markers as cover, one eye on the centre where Torres, Prins and his four minders had congregated.

'Now is the time,' Kidd told me as we gathered.

'No. Not until we see the Sage,' I replied firmly.

By now the Templar and the slaver were doing their deal. From a pouch hanging at his waist, Torres produced a bag that clinked with gold and dropped it into Prins's outstretched hand. Greasing his palm not with silver but gold. Prins weighed it, his eyes never leaving Torres.

'This is but a portion of the ransom,' said Torres. A twitch of his mouth was the only clue he was not his usual composed self. 'The rest is close at hand.'

By now the Dutchman had opened the bag. 'It pains me to traffic someone of my own race for profit, Mr Torres. Tell me again … What has this Roberts

fellow done to upset you?'

'Is this some form of Protestant piety I am not familiar with?'

'Perhaps another day,' Prins said, then unexpectedly tossed the bag back to Torres, who caught it.

'*What?*'

But Prins was already beginning to walk away. He motioned to his guards at the same time, calling to Torres, 'Next time, see that you are not followed!'

And then to his men, 'Deal with this.'

But it wasn't towards Torres that the men rushed. It was towards us.

Blade engaged, I stood from behind my grave marker, braced, and met the first attack with a quick upwards slash across the flank of the first man. It was enough to stop him in his tracks, and I span round him and drove the blade-edge into the other side of his neck, slicing the carotid artery, painting the day red.

He sank and died. I wiped his blood from my face then wheeled and punched through the breastplate of another. A third man I misdirected by leaping to a grave marker. Then made him pay for his mistake with hot steel. Adewalé's pistol cracked, and the fourth man fell and the attack was over. But Kidd had already taken to his heels in pursuit of Prins. With a final glance back at where Torres stood, dazed and unable to take in the sudden turn of events, I gave a yell to Adewalé then set off in pursuit.

'You lost your chance, Kenway,' called Kidd over his shoulder as we both raced through the sun-bleached streets.

'Kidd, no. Come on, man, we can work this together.'

'You had your chance.'

By now Prins had worked out what had gone wrong: his four men, his best bodyguards, lay dead in a graveyard – how apt – and he was alone, pursued through the streets of Kingston by an Assassin.

Little did he know it, but his only chance of survival was me. You had to feel sorry for him. Nobody in their right mind wants Edward Kenway as their only hope.

And then I caught Kidd, grabbed him by the waist and pulled him to the ground.

(And I swear to God – and I'm not just saying this because of what would happen later – but I thought to myself how light he was, how slender was the waist that I grabbed.)

'I can't let you kill him, Kidd,' I gasped, 'not until I've found the Sage.'

'I've been stalking that pig for a week now, charting his moves,' said Kidd angrily, 'and here I find not one but two of my targets – and you rob me of both.'

Our faces were so close together I could feel the heat of his rage.

‘Patience,’ I said, ‘and you’ll have your kills.’

Furious now he pulled away. ‘All right, then,’ he agreed, ‘but when we locate the Sage, you’re going to help me take Prins. Got that?’

We spat and shook. The volcano had erupted but now seemed to settle, and we made our way to Prins’s plantation. So we would have to break in after all. How’s about that for being made to eat your words?

On a low hill overlooking the sugar plantation we found a platform and sat awhile. I watched the work below. The male slaves sang sadly as they hacked at cane, the constant rustle of which seemed to float on the breeze, and women stumbled past bent double beneath heavy baskets of sugar harvest.

Adewalé had told me about life on a plantation, how when the cane was cut and harvested it was run between two metal rollers, and how it was common for a man’s arm to be dragged into the rollers. And when that happened, the only way ‘to separate the man from his plight’ was to hack off the arm. And how after collecting the sugar juice it was time to boil away the waters from the sugar and how the boiling sugar would stick like birdlime and burn on, leaving a terrible scar. ‘I had friends lose eyes,’ he said, ‘and fingers, and arms. And as slaves believe that we never heard a word of praise, nor an apology of any kind.’

I thought of something he’d told me. ‘With this skin and with this voice, where can I go in the world and feel at ease?’

Men like Prins, I realized, were the architects of misery for his people, their ideology the opposite of everything I believed in and everything we stood for at Nassau. We believed in life and liberty. Not this … *subjugation*. This torture. This slow death.

My fists clenched.

Kidd took a pipe from his pocket and smoked a little as we observed the comings and goings below us.

‘There’s guards patrolling that property from end to end,’ he said. ‘Looks to me like they use the bells to signal trouble. See? There.’

‘We’ll want to disable those before pushing too far,’ I said thoughtfully.

From the corner of my eye I saw something odd: Kidd licking his thumb then pressing it into the bowl of his pipe to put it out. Well, that wasn’t odd, but what he did next was. He began dabbing his thumb in the bowl and rubbing ash on his eyelids.

‘With so many men about we can’t rely on stealth alone,’ he said, ‘so I’ll do what I can to distract and draw their attention, giving you a chance to cut them down.’

I watched, wondering what the hell he was playing at, as he cut his finger with a tiny pocket knife, and then squeezed out a drop of blood which he put to his

lips. Next he removed his tricorne. He pulled the tie from his hair, pulled at his hair and ruffled it, so that it fell across his face. He licked the back of one thumb then, like a cat, used it to clean his face. And then he pushed his fingers into his gums, removed bits of wet wadding that had fattened his cheeks and dropped them to the ground.

Next he pulled up his shirt and began unlacing a corset that he pulled out from beneath his shirt and tossed to the ground, revealing, as he then opened the top buttons of his shirt and pulled the collar wider what were, unmistakably, his tits.

My head span. *His* tits? No. *Her* tits. Because when I eventually tore my eyes off the tits and to his face – no, *her* face – I could see that this man was not a man at all.

'Your name is not James, is it?' I said, slightly unnecessarily.

She smiled. 'Not most days. Come on.'

And when she stood, her posture had changed so that where before she'd seemed to walk and move like a man, now there was no doubt. It was as plain as the tits on her chest. She was a woman.

Already beginning to clamber down the hill towards the plantation fence, I skidded to catch up with her.

'Damn it, man. How is it you're a woman?'

'Christ, Edward, is it something that needs explaining? Now, I'm here to do a job. I'll let you be amused later.'

In the end, though, I wasn't really amused. To tell the truth it made perfect sense that she should resort to dressing like a man. Sailors hated having a woman on board ship. They were superstitious about it. If the mystery woman wanted to live the life of a seaman, then that's what she had to be – a sea*man*.

And when I thought about it I goggled at the sheer bloody guts of it. The courage it must have taken for her to do what she did. And I tell you, my sweet, I've met a lot of extraordinary people. Some bad. Some good. Most a mix of good *and* bad, because that's the way most people are. Of all of them the example I'd most like you to follow is hers. Her name was Mary Read. I know you won't forget it. Bravest woman I ever met, bar none.

40

As I waited for Mary by the gates I overheard guards chatting. So Torres had managed to slip away. *Interesting*. And Prins was holed up in his plantation in fear of his life. Good. I hope the fear gripped icy hands at his stomach. I hope the terror kept him awake at nights. I'd look forward to seeing it in his eyes when I killed him.

First, though, to gain entry. And for that I needed …

Here she is now. And you had to hand it to her, she was a superb actor. For God knows how long she'd convinced all of us that she was a man, and now here she was in a new role, not changing sex this time but convincing the guards she was ill. And, yes, doing a bloody good job of it.

'Stand your ground!' ordered a soldier at the gate.

'Please, I've been shot,' she rasped, 'I need aid.'

'Christ, Phillips, look at her. She's hurt.'

The more sympathetic of the two soldiers stepped forward and the gate to the plantation opened in front of her.

'Sir,' she said weakly, 'I'm poorly and faint.'

Sympathetic Soldier offered her his arm to help her inside.

'Bless you, lads,' she said and limped through the gate that closed behind them. I didn't see it from my vantage point, of course, but I heard it: the swish of a blade, the muffled punching sound it made as she drove it into them, the low moan as the last of life escaped them and then the thump of their bodies on the dirt.

And now we were both inside and darting across the compound towards his manor. Probably we were seen by slaves, but we had to hope they wouldn't raise the alarm. Our prayers were answered because moments after that we were creeping into the manor, using hand signals to move stealthily around the rooms – until we came across him standing in a gazebo in a rear yard off the house. Crouched on either side of an archway we peeked round and saw him there, standing with his back to us, his hands across his stomach, looking out over his grounds, pleased with his lot in life – a fat slaver, his fortune built on the

suffering of others. You remember me saying I'd met some who were all bad? Laurens Prins was top of that list.

We looked at one another. The kill belonged to her and yet, for some reason (because they were trying to recruit me?), she waved me onwards, then left on a scout of the rest of the mansion. I got to my feet, went through to the yard, crept beneath the gazebo and stood behind Laurens Prins.

And engaged my blade.

Oh, I kept it well greased; the one thing you can be sure of when it comes to pirates is that while we may not be a particularly domesticated breed, not at all house-proud, with the general state of Nassau a testament to that, we kept our weapons in good nick. Same philosophy as keeping a galleon shipshape. A question of need. A question of survival.

So it was with my blade. When it got wet I cleaned it thoroughly, and I kept it greased to within an inch of its life, and so these days it barely made a noise when I ejected it. It was so quiet, in fact, that Prins didn't hear it.

I cursed, and at last he turned in surprise, perhaps expecting to see one of his guards there, about to shout at the man for his impudence, for creeping up on him like that. Instead I thrust the blade into him and his eyes opened wide and were frozen like that as I let him down to the floor, keeping the blade in him, holding him there as blood filled his lungs and the life began to leave him.

'Why hang over me like a leering crow?' he coughed. 'To see an old man suffer.'

'You've caused no small portion of suffering yourself, Mr Prins,' I told him dispassionately. 'This is retribution, I suppose.'

'You absurd cutthroats and your precious philosophy,' he jeered, the final pathetic contempt of a dying man. 'You live in the world, but you cannot make it move.'

I smiled down at him. 'You mistake my motive, old man. I'm only after a bit of coin.'

'As was I, lad,' he said. 'As was I …'

He died.

I was stepping out of the gazebo, leaving his body behind, when I heard a noise from above. Looking up I saw the Sage Roberts, just as I remembered him, on a balcony. He held Mary hostage, with a flintlock pistol aimed at the side of her head and – clever lad – he held her wrist to stop her engaging her blade.

'I found your man,' she called down, seemingly unconcerned about the pistol at her head. He'd use it, too. The heat in his eyes said so. They blazed. *Remember me, do you, mate?* I thought. *The man who stood by while they took your blood?*

He did. ‘The Templar from Havana,’ he said, nodding.

‘I’m no Templar, mate,’ I called back. ‘That was just a ruse. We’ve come here to save your arse.’

(By which of course I meant, ‘Torture you until you tell us where the Observatory is.’)

‘Save me? I work for Mr Prins.’

‘Well then, he’s a poor man to call master. He meant to sell you out to the Templars.’

He rolled his eyes. ‘You can’t trust anyone, it seems.’

Perhaps he relaxed, for she chose that moment to make her move. She dragged the heel of her boot down his shin and he cried out in pain as she twisted to one side and from underneath his grasp. She flailed for his gun arm but he whipped it away, aimed the gun and fired but missed. Now she was off balance and he saw his chance, pivoting on the rail of the balcony and kicking her with both feet. With a yell she flipped over the rail and I was already starting forward to try to catch her when she caught herself and swung into the balcony below.

Meanwhile, the Sage had drawn another pistol, but guards were arriving, alerted by the gunfire.

‘Roberts,’ I shouted, but instead of shooting at the guards he aimed his second shot at the bell.

Clang.

He couldn’t miss, and it had the desired effect: as Mary dropped lithely down from the second balcony to join me, engaging her blade at the same time, guards came pouring from the archways into the courtyard. Back to back we stood, but there was no time to appraise our enemy at leisure. Muskets and pistols were being produced, so into action we sprang.

Six each, I think, was the tally. Twelve men who died with varying degrees of bravery and skill, and at least one case of dubious suitability for any kind of combat. It was the way he screwed up his eyes and whimpered as he came running into battle.

We heard the running feet of more men arriving and knew that was our cue to escape, dashing from the courtyard then across the compound, urging the slaves to *run, run*, free themselves, as we went. And if there had not been scores of soldiers on our tails, then we would have stopped and forced them to escape. As it is, I don’t know whether they pressed home the advantage we’d given them.

Later we stopped and when I was done cursing my luck at losing Roberts, I asked her real name.

‘Mary Read to my mum,’ she answered, and at the same time I felt something press into my crotch and when I looked down, saw that it was the point of Mary’s hidden blade.

She was smiling, thank God.

‘But not a word of it to anyone,’ she said, ‘or I’ll unman you as well.’

And I never did tell anyone. After all, this was a woman who knew how to piss standing up. I wasn’t about to underestimate her.

41

January, 1718

Dear Edward,

I write with sad news of your father, who passed away one month ago, taken by pleurisy. His passing was not painful, and he died in my arms I am pleased to say. So at least we were together until the very end.

We were poor at the time of his passing and so I have taken a job at a local tavern where you may reach me if you wish to correspond. News of your exploits has found my ears. They say you are a pirate of some infamy. I wish that you could write to me and allay my fears on this matter. I regret to say I have not seen Caroline since you left, and so I am unable to pass you any details regarding her health.

Mother

I looked at the return address. I wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry.

42

Well, I know I was in Nassau during that early part of 1718 – where else would I be, it was my home – but to be honest I remember only fragments. Why? That's a question you need to direct to him in there. Him, that little voice inside who tells you you need one more drink when you know you've had enough. That was the little voice who started hooting and wouldn't let me pass the Old Avery without a trip inside to while away the day, then wake up the next, rough as arseholes, knowing there was only one thing that would make me feel better, and it was served by Anne Bonny, barmaid at the Old Avery. And then, what do you know? The whole circle – a *vicious* bloody circle – would begin again.

And yes I've since worked out I drank to drown my discontent, but that's the thing with drinking, you often don't know why at the time. You don't realize that the drinking is a symptom, not a cure. So I sat and watched as Nassau fell to rack and ruin. And being so drunk I forgot to feel disgusted about it. Instead I spent day after day at the same table of the Old Avery, either staring at my filched picture of the Observatory or attempting to etch out a letter to Mother or to Caroline. Thinking of Father. Wondering if the fire at the farmhouse had hastened his death. Wondering if I was to blame for that, too, and knowing the answer was the reason why my letters to Mother ended up crumpled bits of paper on the floor of the terrace.

Mind you, I wasn't so wrapped up in my problems that I forgot to eye up the delicious behind of Anne Bonny, even if she was off-limits (*officially*, that was. But Anne, let's just say she liked the company of pirates, if you know what I mean).

Anne had arrived in Nassau with her husband, James, a buccaneer and lucky bleeder for being married to her. Having said that, she had a way about her did Anne, like she wasn't afraid to give a fellow the glad eye, which did make you wonder if old James Bonny had his hands full with that one. I'd wager that serving ales at the Old Avery wasn't *his* idea.

'There's precious little in this town but piss and insects,' she used to complain, blowing strands of hair off her face. She was right, but still she stayed, fending off the advances of most, accepting the advances of a lucky few.

It was around that time, as I wallowed in my own misery, days spent chasing away hangovers and working on new ones, that we first heard about the king's pardon.

'It's a bag of shite!'

Charles Vane had said that. His words penetrating that mid-morning booze buzz I'd been working on.

What was?

'It's a ruse,' he thundered to keep us soft before they attack Nassau! You'll see. Mark me.'

What was a ruse?

'It's no ruse, Vane,' said Blackbeard, his voice betraying an unusual seriousness. 'I heard it straight from the mouth of the greasy Bermudan captain. There's a pardon on offer for any pirate that wants it.'

A pardon. I let the words sink in.

Hornigold was there, too. 'Ruse or not, I think it's plain the British may return to Nassau,' he said. 'With arms no doubt. In the absence of any clear ideas, I say we lay low. No piracy and no violence. Do nothing to ruffle the king's feathers for now.'

'Preserving the king's plumage is no concern of mine, Ben,' Blackbeard rebuked him.

Benjamin turned on him. 'It will be when he sends his soldiers to scrub this island clean of our residue. Look around you man, is this cesspool worth dying for?'

He was right, of course. It stank, and more so every day: a vomitous mixture of shit and bilge water and rotting carcasses. But even so, difficult though it might be for you to believe, it was *our* vomitous mixture of shit and bilge water and rotting carcasses, and we were prepared to fight for it. Besides, it didn't smell so bad when you were drunk.

'Aye, it's our republic. Our idea,' insisted Blackbeard. 'A free land for free men, remember? So maybe it's filthy to look at. But ain't it still an idea worth fighting for?'

Benjamin averted his eyes. *Had he already decided? Had he made his choice?*

'I can't be sure,' he said. 'For when I look on fruits of our years of labour, all I see is sickness … idleness … idiocy.'

Remember what I said about Benjamin? How he dressed differently, had a more military bearing. Looking back now I think he never really wanted to be a pirate; that his ambitions lay on the other side, with His Majesty's navy. He was never especially keen on attacking ships, for one thing, which was a rarity among us. Blackbeard told the story of how a vessel under his command had

once laid siege to a sloop, only for Benjamin to steal the passengers' hats. That's all, just their hats. And yes, you might think it was because he was an old softy and didn't want to terrorize the passengers too much, and maybe you'd be right. But the fact is, out of all of us, Benjamin Hornigold was the least like a pirate, almost as though he wasn't willing to accept that he was one.

All that being the case, I don't suppose I should have been surprised by what happened next.

43

July, 1718

Dearest Caroline …

And that, on that particular occasion (location: the Old Avery, as if you needed telling), was as far as I got.

‘Putting some shape to your sentiments?’ Anne stood over me, brown and beautiful. A treat for the eyes.

‘Just a short letter home. I reckon she’s past caring anyway.’

I crumpled up the letter and tossed it away.

‘Ah, you’ve got a hard heart,’ said Anne as she moved off behind the bar, ‘it should be softer.’

Aye, I thought. Yer right, lass. And that soft heart felt like it was melting. In the months since we’d heard about the king’s pardon, Nassau was riven, divided into those who took the pardon, those who planned to take the pardon (after one final score), and those who were dead against the pardon and cursed all others, led by Charles Vane, and …

Blackbeard? My old friend was keeping his powder dry, but looking back I think he’d decided that a life of piracy was no longer for him. He was away for Nassau on the lookout for prizes. News of big scores and strange allegiances were reaching our ears. I began to think that when Blackbeard had left Nassau he never had any intention of returning. (And he never did, as far as I know.)

And me? Well, on the one hand, I was wary being mates with Vane. On the other, I didn’t want to take the pardon, which made me mates with Vane whether I liked it or not. Vane had been waiting for Jacobite reinforcements to arrive but they never had. Instead he began making plans to leave, maybe establish another pirate republic elsewhere. I would take the *Jackdaw* and leave with him. What other choice did I have?

And then came that morning, a few days before we were due to depart, as I sat on the terrace of the Old Avery, trying to write my letter to Caroline and passing the time of day with Anne Bonny, when we heard the sound of carriage-gun fire from the harbour. An eleven-gun salute, it was, and we knew exactly what was

up. We'd been forewarned about it. The British were coming to take control of the island.

And here they were. A blockade that bottles up both entrances to the harbour. HMS *Milford* and HMS *Rose* were the muscle. Two warships escorting a fleet of five other vessels, on which were soldiers, craftsmen, supplies, building materials, an entire colony come to flush out the Pirates, drag Nassau up by its bootstraps and return it to respectability.

They were led by the flagship *Delicia*, which despatched rowing boats to negotiate the graveyard of ships and land on our beach. As we arrived there, along with every other jack tar in Nassau, its occupants were just landing. None other than my old friend Woodes Rogers. He was helped out of his rowing boat looking as tanned and well-kept as ever, though more careworn. You remember his promise to be governor of Havana? He'd delivered on that. Remember him telling me how he planned to rout the pirates from Nassau? Looked as though he planned on delivering on that one, too.

Never had I longed for Blackbeard more. One thing I knew was that my old friend Edward Thatch would have known which way to turn. A mix of instinct and cunning would have powered him like the wind.

'Well I'll be hanged,' Calico Jack said by my side (*tempting fate there, Jack*), 'King George has grown tired of our shenanigans. Who's the grim fella?'

'That's Captain Woodes Rogers,' I replied, and as I was in no hurry to reacquaint myself with him, I shrank into the crowd, but still close enough to hear as Rogers was handed a roll of parchment that he consulted, before saying, 'we desire a parley with the men who call themselves governors of this island. Charles Vane, Ben Hornigold and Edward Thatch. Come forth, if you please?'

Benjamin stepped forward.

'Lily-livered punk,' cursed Jack. And never was a truer word spoken. For if there was a moment that Nassau came to an end and our hopes for the republic were dashed, then that was it.

44

November, 1718

It wasn't until I found him that I really realized how much I had missed him.

Little did I know I was soon to lose him for good.

It was on a North Carolina beach, Ocracoke Bay, just before dawn and he was having a party – of course – and had been up all night – of course.

There were campfires dotted all over the beach, men dancing a jig to the sound of a fiddle further along, other men passing a blackjack of rum between them and guffawing loudly. Wild boar cooked on a spit and the delicious scent of it made my stomach do hungry flips. Perhaps here, on Ocracoke Beach, Blackbeard had established his own pirate republic. Perhaps he had no interest whatsoever in returning to Nassau and making things right.

Charles Vane was already there, and as I approached, trudging up the sand towards them and already anticipating the liquor on my lips and the wild boar in my belly, he was standing, his conversation with Blackbeard evidently just ending.

'A great disappointment you are, Thatch!' he bellowed nastily, then on seeing me said, 'His mind is made up to stay here, he says. So sod him and hang all you that follow this sorry bastard into obscurity.'

Anybody else but Blackbeard and Vane would have slit his throat for being a traitor to the cause. But he didn't, because it was Blackbeard.

Anybody else but Vane and Blackbeard would have had him put in leg irons for his insolence. But he didn't. Why? Maybe out of guilt, because Blackbeard had turned his back on piracy. Maybe because no matter what you thought of Charles, you had to admire his guts, his devotion to the cause. None had fought harder against the pardon than Charles. None had been a bigger thorn in Rogers's side than he. He'd launched a fireship against their blockade and escaped, then continued to orchestrate raids on New Providence, doing anything he could to disrupt Rogers's governorship while he waited for reinforcements to arrive. The particular reinforcements he hoped for wore black in battle and went

by the name Blackbeard. But as I arrived on the beach that balmy morning, it looked as though the last of Charles Vane's hopes had been dashed.

He left, his feet kicking up clouds of sand as he stomped back along the beach, away from the flickering warmth of the campfires, shaking with rage.

We watched him go. I looked down at Blackbeard. His belts were unbuckled, his coat unbuttoned and his newly acquired belly thrust at the buttons of his shirt. He said nothing, simply ushered me to take a seat on the sand beside him, handed me a bottle of wine and waited for me to take a drink.

'That man is a prick,' he said slightly drunkenly, waving a hand in the direction of where Charles Vane had been.

Ah, I thought, *but the irony is your old mucker Edward Kenway wants the same thing as the prick.*

Vane might have been devoted to the cause, but he didn't have the faith of the brethren. Always a cruel man, he'd lately become even more ruthless and savage. I'd been told that his new trick was to torture captives by tying them to the bowsprit, inserting matches beneath their eyelids – and then lighting them. Even the men who followed him had begun to question him. Perhaps Vane knew it as well as I did – that Nassau needed a leader who could inspire the men. Nassau needed Blackbeard.

He stood now, Blackbeard, Charles Vane a distant dot on the horizon, and beckoned me to follow.

'I know you've come to call me home, Kenway.' He looked touched. 'Your faith in me is kind. But with Nassau done in, I feel I'm finished.'

I was telling the truth when I said, 'I'm not of the same mind, mate. But I won't begrudge you the state of yours.'

He nodded. 'Jaysus, Edward. Living like this is like living with a large hole in your gut, and every time your innards spill over the ground, you're obliged to scoop 'em up and shove 'em back in. When Ben and me first set down in Nassau, I undervalued the needs for folks of character to shape and guide the place to its full purpose. But I was not wrong about the corruption that comes with that course.'

For a moment as we walked we listened to the tide on the sand, the soft rushing, receding noise of the sea. Perhaps he, like me, when he thought of corruption, thought of Benjamin.

'Once a man gets a taste of leadership, it's hard for him not to wonder why he ain't in charge of the whole world.'

He gestured behind. 'I know these men think me a fine captain, but I bloody hate the taste of it. I'm arrogant. I lack the balance needed to lead from behind the crowd.'

I thought I knew what he meant. I thought I understood. But I didn't like it – I didn't like the fact that Blackbeard was drifting away from us.

We walked.

'You still looking for that Sage fellow?' he asked me. I told him I was, but said nothing of how the search for the Sage had consisted mainly of sitting in the Old Avery drinking and thinking of Caroline.

'Ah, well, taking a prize a month back I heard a man named Roberts was working a slave ship called the *Princess*. Might want to see about it?'

So – the carpenter with the dead eyes, the man with the ageless knowledge, had moved on from plantations to slave ships. That made sense.

'The *Princess*. Cheers, Thatch.'

45

The British were coming after Blackbeard, of course. I later found out it was a force led by Lieutenant Maynard of HMS *Pearl*. A reward had been put on Blackbeard's head by the governor of Virginia after merchants made a noise about Blackbeard's habit of sailing from Ocracoke Bay and taking the odd prize here and there; the governor worried that Ocracoke inlet would soon become another Nassau. The governor didn't like having the world's most infamous pirate in his back yard. So the governor put a bounty on his head. And so they came, the British did.

The first we heard of it was a whispered alarm. 'The English are coming. The English are coming,' and looking through the gun hatches of Blackbeard's sloop the *Adventure* we saw that they'd launched a small boat and were trying to sneak up on us. We would have completely destroyed them, of course, but for one thing. One crucial thing. You know that party I was talking about? The wine and the wild boar? It had gone on. And on.

We were very, very, catastrophically hungover.

And so the best response we could manage was warning the rowing boat off with some shot.

There were very few us aboard the Blackbeard's ship that morning. Perhaps twenty at the most. But I was one of them, little knowing I was to play a part in what happened next: the fate of the world's most famous pirate.

And give him his due, he may have been hungover – just as we all were – but Blackbeard knew the waterways around Ocracoke Bay and so off we went, weighing anchor and making haste for the sandbanks.

Behind us came Maynard's men. They flew the red ensign and left us in no doubt as to what they intended. I saw it in Blackbeard's eyes. My old friend Edward Thatch. All of us aboard the *Adventure* that day knew the English were after him and him alone. The governor of Virginia's declaration had named only one pirate, and that pirate was Edward Thatch. I think we all knew we weren't the real targets of these dogged English, it was Blackbeard. Nevertheless, not one man gave himself up or threw himself overboard. There was not a man

among us who was not willing to die for him – that was the devotion and loyalty he inspired. If only he could have used those qualities in service of Nassau.

The day was calm, there was no wind in our sails and we had to use our sweepers to make progress. We could see the whites of our pursuers' eyes, and they could see ours. Blackbeard ran to our stern, where he leaned over the gunwale and shouted across the still channel at Maynard.

'Damn you, villains, who are you? And where did you come from?'

Those on the ship behind gave no answer, just stared at us blank-eyed. Probably they wanted to unsettle us.

'You may see by our colours we are no pirates,' bellowed Blackbeard waving around himself, his voice echoing strangely from the steep sandbanks on both sides of the narrow channel. 'Launch a boat to board us. You'll see we are no pirates.'

'I cannot spare a boat to launch,' called Maynard back. There was a pause. 'I'll board you with my sloop soon enough.'

Blackbeard cursed and raised a glass of rum to toast him. 'I drink *damnation* to you and your men, who are cowardly puppies! I shall give nor take no quarter.'

'And in return I expect no quarter from you, Edward Thatch, and nor will I give any in return.'

The two sloops under Maynard's command came on, and for the first time ever, I saw my friend Edward Thatch at a loss for what to do. For the first time ever, I thought I saw fear in those eyes.

'Edward …' I tried to say, wanting to take him to one side, wanting us to sit together, as we had so many times at the Old Avery, to plot and plan and scheme, but not for the taking of a prize this time, no. To escape the English. To get to safety. Around us the crew worked in a kind of booze-soaked daze. Blackbeard himself was swigging rum, his voice rising along with his inebriation. And of course the more drunk he became, the less open to reason, the more reckless and rash his actions, such as when he ordered the guns be primed, and because we had no shot, filled with nails and pieces of old iron.

'Edward, no …'

I tried to stop him, knowing there had to be a better, more tactful way to escape the English. Knowing that to fire upon them would be to sign our own death warrants. We were outnumbered, outgunned. Their men were not drunk or hungover and they had the burning light of zealotry in their eyes. They wanted one thing and that thing was Blackbeard – drunk, angry, raging and probably, secretly, terrified Blackbeard.

Boom.

The spread of the gun shot was wide, but we saw nothing beyond a shroud of smoke and sand, which obscured our vision. For long moments we waited with bated breath to see what damage our broadside had inflicted, and all we heard were screams and the sound of splintering wood. Whatever damage we'd done, it sounded grievous, and as the fog cleared we saw that one of the pursuing ships had veered off to the side and beached, while the other seemed to have been hit as well, with no sign of any crew aboard and parts of its hull shredded and splintered. From the mouths of the crew came a weak if heartfelt cheer and we began to wonder if all was not lost after all.

Blackbeard looked at me, next to him at the gunwale, and winked.

'The other one's still coming though, Edward,' I warned. 'They'll return fire.'

Return fire they did. They used chain shot, which destroyed our jib, and in the next moment victorious cheers had turned to shouts as our ship was no longer seaworthy, lurching to the side of the channel and listing, its splintered masts grazing the steep-sided banks. Meantime, as we bobbed uselessly in the swell, the chasing sloop nosed up on our starboard side, giving us a good opportunity to see what strength they had remaining. Precious little, it looked like. We could see a man at the tiller, with Maynard by his side gesturing as he cried, 'Pull alongside, pull alongside …'

Which is when Edward decided attack was the best form of defence. He gave word for the men to arm themselves and prepare to board, and we waited with our pistols primed and cutlasses drawn, a final stand in a deserted back channel in the West Indies.

Powder smoke shrouded us, thick layers of it hanging like hammocks in the air. It stung our eyes and gave the scene an eerie feel, as though the English sloop was a ghost ship, appearing from within the folds of a spirit-mist. To add to the effect, its decks remained empty. Just Maynard and the mate at the helm, Maynard shouting, 'Pull alongside, pull alongside …' his eyes wild and rolling like a madman. The look of him, not to mention the state of his ship, gave us hope – it gave us hope that maybe they were in even worse shape than we'd at first thought; that this wasn't the final stand after all; that maybe we'd live to fight another day.

A false hope, as it would turn out.

All was quiet, just Maynard's increasingly hysterical shrieking as we crouched hidden behind the gunwale. How many men were still left alive on the sloop, we had no real way of telling, but one of us was confident at least.

'We've knocked them on their heads except three or four,' shouted Blackbeard. He was wearing his black hat, I noticed, and he'd lit the fuses in his

beard, was shrouded in smoke, his hangover cast off, he glowed like a devil. ‘Let’s jump aboard and cut them to pieces.’

Only three or four? There had to be more of them left alive than that, surely?

But by then the two hulls had bumped, and with a shout, Blackbeard led us over the side of the *Adventure* and on to the British sloop, roaring a brutal warrior roar as the men flooded towards Maynard and the first mate at the tiller.

But Maynard, he was as good a performer as my friend Mary Read. For as soon as our dozen pirates boarded his ship, that wild hysterical look left his face, he shouted, ‘*Now, men, now!*’ and a hatch in the quarterdeck opened and the trap was sprung.

They’d been hiding from us, playing possum, pretending to be dead, luring us on board. And now out they came, like rats escaping bilge water, two dozen of them to meet our plucky twelve, and straight away the clashing of steel, the popping of gunshot and the screams filled the air.

A man was upon me. I punched him in the face and engaged my blade at the same time, dodging to the side to avoid a fountain of blood and snot that erupted from his nose. In my other hand was my pistol, but I heard Blackbeard calling me, ‘*Kenway*.’

He was down, with a leg bleeding badly, defending himself with his sword and calling for a gun. I tossed him mine and he caught it, using it to fell a man coming at him with raised cutlass.

He was dead, though. We both knew it. We all knew it.

‘In a world without gold, we could have been heroes!’ he shouted as they teemed over him.

Maynard led a renewed attack upon him and Blackbeard, seeing his nemesis up close, bared his teeth and swung his sword. Maynard screeched, his hand gushing crimson as he pulled away and his sword fell, its guard broken. From his belt he snatched a pistol, fired it, catching Edward on the shoulder and sending him back to his knees where he grunted and swung his sword as the enemy moved in on him remorselessly.

Around us I could see more of our men falling. I drew my second pistol, fired, and gave one of their men a third eye, but now they were upon me, swarming over me. I cut men down. I cut them ruthlessly. And the knowledge that my next attacker would die the same way kept a few of them at bay, giving me the chance to glance over and see Edward dying by a thousand cuts, on his knees but fighting still, surrounded by vultures who hacked and chopped at him with their blades.

With a shout of frustration and anger I stood and whirled with outstretched hands, my blade forming a perimeter of death that sent men flailing backwards. I

snatched the initiative, shooting forward and drop-kicking the man in front of me so that his chest and face became my springboard and I broke through the barrier of men surrounding me. In the air my blade flashed and two men fell away with open veins, blood hitting the deck with an audible slap. I landed then sprang across the deck to help my friend.

But never made it. From my left came a sailor who stopped my progress, a huge brute of a man who thumped into me, the two of us moving at such speed that neither of us could stop the momentum that took us over the side of the gunwale and into the water below.

I saw one thing before I fell. I saw my friend's throat open and blood sheet down his front, his eyes rolling to the top of his head as Blackbeard fell for a final time.

46

December, 1718

You've not heard a man screaming in pain until you've heard a man who's just had his kneecap blown off screaming in pain.

That was the punishment dealt by Charles Vane to the captain of the British slave ship we'd boarded. The same British slave ship had virtually scuttled Vane's own vessel, so we'd had to sail the *Jackdaw* nearby and allow his men on board. Vane had been furious about that, but even so that was no excuse to lose his temper. After all, this whole expedition had been his idea.

He'd hatched his plan soon after Edward's death.

'So Thatch has been topped?' he said as we sat in the captain's quarters of the *Jackdaw*, with Calico Jack drunk and asleep nearby, lying straight-legged in the chair in a way that seemed to defy gravity. He was another who had refused to take the king's pardon, so we were stuck with him.

'He was outnumbered,' I said of Blackbeard. The image was an unwelcome new arrival in my mind. 'I couldn't reach him.'

I remembered falling, seeing him die, blood pouring from his throat, hacked down like a rabid dog. I took another long swig of rum to banish the image.

They'd hung his head from the bowsprit as a trophy, so I'd heard.

And they called *us* scum.

'Devil damn the man, he was fierce, but his heart was divided,' said Charles. He'd been worrying at my tabletop with the point of his knife. Any other guest I'd have told to stop but not Charles Vane. A Charles Vane defeated by Woodes Rogers. A Charles Vane mourning the death of Blackbeard. Most of all, a Charles Vane with a knife in his hand.

He was right, though, with what he said. Even if Blackbeard had lived there was little doubt he intended to leave the life behind. To stand at our head and lead us out of the wilderness was not something that had appealed to Edward Thatch.

We lapsed into silence. Perhaps we were both thinking of Nassau and how it belonged in the past. Or perhaps we were both wondering what to do in the

future, because after some moments, Vane took a deep breath, seemed to pull himself together and slapped his fists to his thighs.

'Right, Kenway,' he announced, 'I've been musing on this plan of yours … This … Observatory you was going on about. How do we know it exists?'

I shot him a sideways look to see if he was joking. After all, he wouldn't have been the first. I'd been much mocked for my tales of the Observatory and wasn't in the mood for any more, not now anyway. But he wasn't, he was deadly serious, leaning forward in his chair, awaiting my answer. Calico Jack slumbered on.

'We find a slave ship called the *Princess*. Aboard should be a man called Roberts. He can lead us to it.'

Charles seemed to think. 'All them slavers work for the Royal African Company. Let's find any one of their ships and start asking some questions.'

But unfortunately for us all, the first Royal African Company ship we encountered blew holes in Vane's ship, the *Ranger*, meaning he needed to be rescued. At last we boarded the slave ship, where our men had already quietened down the slaver's crew. There we found the captain.

'This captain claims the *Princess* sails out of Kingston every few months,' I told Vane.

'All right. We'll set a course,' said Vane, and the decision was made: we were heading for Kingston, and no doubt the slave captain would have been okay and left unharmed, had he not called out angrily, 'You made a hash of my sails and rigging, you jackanapes. You owe me a share.'

Every man there who knew Charles Vane could have told you what would happen next. Not exactly. But the kind of thing: terrible violence, no remorse. So it was at that moment, when he swung round, drew his gun and strode over to the captain in one quick and furious movement. Then he put the muzzle of the gun to the captain's knee, his other hand held to stop himself being splashed with blood. And pulled the trigger.

It happened quickly. Matter-of-factly. And in the aftermath Charles Vane walked away, about to move past me.

'Dammit, Vane!'

'Oh, Charles, what a surly devil you are,' said Calico Jack, and it was a rare moment of sobriety from Calico Jack, a fact that was almost as shocking as the captain's piercing screams, but then the old drunkard was seemingly in the mood to challenge Charles Vane.

Vane turned on his quartermaster. 'Don't fuck with me, Jack.'

'It is my mandate to fuck with you, Charles,' snapped Calico Jack, normally laid out drunk, but today in a mood to challenge Vane's authority, it seemed.

‘Lads,’ he commanded, and as if on cue – as though they had been awaiting their chance – several men loyal to Calico Jack stepped forward with drawn weapons. We were outnumbered, but that didn’t stop Adewalé, about to draw his cutlass, only to feel the full weight of a guard across his face, which sent him crumpling to the deck.

I found myself with a face full of pistol barrels when I moved forward to help.

‘See … The boys and I had a bit of a council while you were wasting time with this lot,’ said Calico Jack, indicating the captured slaver. ‘And they figured I’d be a fitter captain than you reckless dogs.’

He gestured towards Adewalé, and my blood rose as he said, ‘This one I figure I may sell for a tenner in Kingston. But with you two, I can’t take any chances.’

Surrounded, me, Charles, and our men were helpless to do anything. My mind reeled, wondering where it had all gone so wrong. Had we needed Blackbeard that much? Did we rely on him so heavily that things could go so terribly awry in his absence? It seems so. It seems so.

‘You’ll regret this day, Rackham,’ I hissed.

‘I regret most of them already,’ sighed the mutineer Calico Jack. His colourful Indian shirt was the last thing I saw as another man came forward clutching a black bag that he pulled over my head.

47

And that was how we found ourselves marooned on Providencia. After a month adrift on the damaged *Ranger*, that was.

Jack had left us food and weapons but we had no means of steering or sailing the ship, so it was a month at sea in which we tried and failed to repair the broken rigging and masts and spent most of the day manning the pumps in order to stay afloat; a month in which I'd had to listen to Vane ranting and raving all hours of the day and night. Shaking his fist at thin air, he was. 'I'll get ya Jack Rackham! I'll open y'up. I'll tear out your organs and string a bloody lute with them.'

We spent Christmas 1718 on the *Ranger*, bobbing around like a discarded liquor bottle on the waves, praying for mercy from the weather. Just me and him. And of course we had no calendars or such, so it was impossible to say when Christmas fell or which day 1718 became 1719, but I'm prepared to wager I spent them listening to Charles Vane rage at the sea, at the sky, at me, and especially at his old mucker Calico Jack Rackham.

'I'll get ya! You see if I don't, y'scurvy bastid!'

And when I tried to remonstrate with him, hinting that perhaps his constant shouting was doing more harm to our morale than good, he turned on me.

'Well, well, the fearsome Edward Kenway speaks!' he'd bawl. 'Pray tell us, cap'n, how to quit this predicament and tell us what genius you have for sailing a boat with no sails and no rudder.'

How we didn't kill each other during that time, I'll never know, but by God we were glad to see land. We hooted with pleasure, clasped each other, jumped up and down. We launched a yawl from the stricken *Ranger*, and as night fell we rowed ashore then collapsed on the beach, exhausted but ecstatic that after a month drifting at sea we'd finally found land.

The next morning we awoke to find the *Ranger* wrecked against the beach and cursed one another for failing to drop anchor.

And then cursed our luck as we realized just how small it was, the island on which we were now marooned.

Providencia, it was called, a small island with its fair share of history. A bloody history, at that. English colonists, pirates and the Spanish had done nothing but fight over it for the best part of a century. Forty years ago, the great pirate Captain Henry Morgan had set his cap at it, recaptured it from the Spanish and used it as his base for a while.

By the time Vane and I set down upon the island, it was home to a few colonists, escaped slaves and convicts and the remnants of the Mosquito Indians who were native to it. You could explore the abandoned fort, but there was nothing much left. Nothing you could eat or drink anyway. And you could swim across to Santa Catalina, but then, that was even smaller. So mainly we spent the days fishing and finding frond oysters in small pools, and occasionally having a kind of snarling stand-off with groups of passing natives, ragged, wandering colonists or turtle fishermen. The colonists, in particular, always wore a wild, frightened look, as though they weren't sure whether to attack or run away, and could just as well do either. Their eyes seemed to swivel in their sockets in different directions at once and they made odd, twitchy movements with dry, sun-parched lips.

I turned to Charles Vane after one particular encounter, about to comment, and saw that he, too, was wearing a wild look, and his eyes seemed to swivel in their sockets, and he made odd, twitchy movements with his dry, sun-parched lips.

Until whatever fragile cord holding Charles Vane together snapped one day, and off he went to start a new Providencia tribe. A tribe of one. I should have tried to talk him out of it. *'Charles we must stick together.'* But I was sick to the back teeth of Charles Vane, and, anyway, it wasn't like I'd seen the last of him. He took to stealing my oysters for a start, scuttling out of the jungle, hairy and unshaven, his clothes ragged and with a look of the madman in his eyes. He'd scoop up my just-caught frond oysters, curse me for a bastard then scuttle back into the undergrowth from which he would curse me some more. My days were spent on the beach, swimming, fishing or scanning the horizon for vessels, all the time knowing full well he was tracking me from within the undergrowth.

On one occasion I tried to remonstrate with him. 'Will you talk with me, Vane? Are you fixed on this madness?'

'Madness?' he responded. 'Ain't nothing mad about a man fighting to survive, is there?'

'I mean you no harm, you corker. Let's work this out like gentlemen.'

'Ah. God, I've a bleedin' headache on account of our jabbering. Now stay back and let me live in peace!'

'I would if you'd stop filching the food I gather, and the water I find.'

‘I’ll stop nothing till you paid me back in blood. You was the reason we were out looking for slavers. You was the reason Jack Rackham took my ship!’

You see what I had to contend with? He was losing his mind. He blamed me for things that were plainly his own fault. It was he who had suggested we go after the Observatory. It was he who’d caused our current predicament by killing the slaver captain. I had as much reason to hate him as he had to despise me. The difference between us was that I hadn’t lost my mind. At least not yet anyway. He was doing his best to remedy that, it seemed. He got crazier and crazier.

‘You and your fairy stories got us into this mess, Kenway!’

He stayed in the bushes, like a rodent in the darkened undergrowth, curled up in roots, with his arms round tree trunks, crouched in his own stink and watching me with craven eyes. It began to occur to me that Vane might try to kill me. I kept my blades clean and though I didn’t wear them – I’d become accustomed to wearing very little – I kept them close at hand.

Before I knew it he graduated from being a madman ranting at me from within the undergrowth to leaving traps for me.

Until one day I decided I’d had enough. I had to kill Charles Vane.

The morning that I set out to do it, it was with a heavy heart. I wondered whether it was better to have a madman as a companion than no companion at all. But he was a madman who hated me, and who probably wanted to kill me. It was either him or me.

I found him in a water hole, sitting crouched with his hands between his legs, trying to make a fire and singing to himself, some nonsense song.

His back was to me, offering me an easy kill, and I tried to tell myself I was being humane by putting him out of his misery, as I approached stealthily and activated my blade.

But I couldn’t help myself. I hesitated, and in that moment he sprang his trap, flinging out one arm and tossing hot ashes into my face. As I reeled back he jumped to his feet, cutlass in hand, and the battle was on.

Attack. Parry. Attack. I used my blade as a sword, meeting his steel and replying with my own.

And I wondered: did he think of me as *betraying* him? Probably. His hatred gave him strength and for some moments he was no longer the pathetic troglodyte he had become, the fight returned to his eye. But it was not enough to turn the battle. The weeks spent crouching in the undergrowth and feeding off what he could steal had weakened him and I disarmed him easily. Instead of killing him then I sheathed my blade, unstrapped it and tossed it away, tearing off my shirt at the same time, and we fought with fists, stripped to the waist.

Then when I had him down and pummelled him, I caught myself and stopped. I stood, breathing heavily, with blood dripping from my fists. Below me on the ground, Charles Vane. This unkempt, hermit-looking man – and of course I stank myself, but I wasn't as bad as him. I could smell the shit I saw dried on his thighs as he half rolled on the ground and spat out a tooth on a thin string of saliva, chuckling to himself. *Chuckling to himself like a madman.*

'You nancy boy,' he said, 'you've only done half the job.'

I shook my head. 'Is this my reward for believing the best about men? For thinking a bilge rat like you could muster up some sense once in a while? Maybe Hornigold was right. Maybe the world does need men of ambition, to stop the likes of you from messing it all up.'

Charles laughed. 'Or maybe you just don't have the stones to live with no regrets.'

I spat. 'Don't save me a spot in hell, shanker. I ain't coming soon.'

And then I left him there, and when later I was able to help myself to a fisherman's boat I wondered whether to go and fetch him, but decided against.

God forgive me, but I'd had just about all I could take of Charles bloody Vane.

48

May, 1719

I arrived home to Inagua after months away, thankful to be alive and glad to see my crew. Even more when I saw how pleased they were to see me. *He is alive! The cap'n is alive!* They celebrated for days, drank the bay dry, and it gladdened the heart to see.

Mary was there too, but dressed as James Kidd, so I banished all thoughts of her bosoms, called her James when others were present, even Adewalé, who rarely left my side when I first returned, as though not wanting to let me out of his sight.

Meanwhile Mary had news of my confederates: Stede Bonnet had been hanged at White Point.

Poor old Stede. My merchant friend who evidently changed his mind where pirates were concerned – so much so he'd taken up the life himself. 'The gentleman pirate' they had called him. He'd worn a dressing gown and worked the routes further north for a while, before meeting Blackbeard on his travels. The pair had teamed up, but because Bonnet was as bad a pirate captain as he was a sailor, which is to say a very bad pirate captain, his crew had mutinied and joined Blackbeard. For Bonnet the final insult was that he had to remain as a 'guest' on Blackbeard's ship, the *Queen Anne's Revenge*. Well, not the 'final insult' obviously. The final insult was being caught and hanged.

Meanwhile on Nassau – poor, ailing Nassau – James Bonny was spying for Woodes Rogers, bringing more shame upon Anne than her roving eye ever had upon him, while Rogers had struck a mortal blow to the pirates. In a show of strength he'd ordered eight of them be hanged on Nassau harbour, and since then his opposition had crumbled. Even a plot to kill him had been half-hearted and easily overthrown.

And – joy of joys – Calico Jack had been captured and the *Jackdaw* recovered. Turned out the liquor had got the better of Jack. Privateers commissioned by Jamaica's governor had caught up with him south of Cuba. Jack and his men had gone ashore and were sleeping off the booze under tents

when the privateers arrived, so they fled into the jungle and the *Jackdaw* was recovered. Since then the scurvy dog had crawled back to Nassau where he'd persuaded Rogers to give him a pardon and was hanging around the taverns selling stolen watches and stockings.

'So what now?' said Mary, having delivered her news. 'Still chasing your elusive fortune?'

'Aye, and I'm close. I've heard the Sage is sailing out of Kingston on a ship called the *Princess*.'

James had stood and was beginning to walk away, headed for the port. 'Put your ambition to better use, Kenway. Find the Sage with *us*.'

The Assassins she meant, of course. There was silence when I thought about them.

'I've no stomach for you and your mystics … Mary. I want a taste of the good life. An easy life.'

She shook her head and began to walk away. Over her shoulder she said, 'No one honest has an easy life, Edward. It's aching for one that causes the most pain.'

If the *Princess* was sailing out of Kingston then Kingston was where I needed to be.

And, my God, Kingston was beautiful. It had grown from a refugee camp into the largest town in Jamaica, which isn't to say it was an especially large town, just the largest in Jamaica, the buildings new yet ramshackle-looking, overlooked by hills populated by beautiful greenery and caressed by a cool sea breeze that rolled off Port Royal and took some of the sting out of a blistering sun – just some of it, mind, just some of it. I loved it. In Kingston, I'd look around and wonder if Nassau could have been this way, if we'd stuck at it. If we hadn't allowed ourselves to be so easily corrupted.

The sea was the clearest blue and it seemed to glitter and hold aloft the ships that were anchored in the bay. For a moment, as I gasped at the beauty of the sea and was reminded of the treasures it held, I thought of Bristol. How I'd stood on the harbour there and looked out to the ocean, dreaming of riches and adventure. The adventure I'd found. The riches? Well, the *Jackdaw* hadn't lain completely dormant during my time on Providencia. They'd taken some prizes. Added to what I already had in my coffers, I wasn't rich, exactly, but neither was I poor. Perhaps I was, finally, a man of means.

But if I could just find the Observatory.

(Greed, you see, my sweet, it's the undoing of many a man.)

Tethered at the quay were rowing boats, dandies and yawls, but it wasn't those I was interested in. I stopped and held a spyglass to my eye, scanning the horizon for signs of a slaver – the *Princess* – stopping to relish the glorious sight of the *Jackdaw*, then continued. Citizens and traders bustled past, all wares for sale. And soldiers, too. Spaniards, with their blue tunics and tricornes, muskets over their shoulders. A pair of them passed, looking bored and gossiping.

'What's all this fuss about here? Everyone's got sticks shoved well up their arses today.'

'Aye, we're on alert because of some visiting Spaniard. Toreador or Torres or something.'

So he was here. Him and Rogers. Did they know about the Sage on the Princess, *too?*

And then something that struck me as very interesting indeed, when I overheard a soldier say, 'Do you know what I heard? Governor Rogers and Captain Hornigold are part of a secret society. A secret order made up of Frenchies and Spaniards and Italians and even some Turks.'

Templars, I was thinking, even as I caught sight of Adewalé beckoning to me. He stood with a sweaty, nervous-looking sailor, who was introduced as working for the Royal Africa Company. A jack tar persuaded to talk with a surreptitious dagger in his ribs.

'Tell him what you told me,' said Adewalé.

The merchant looked uncomfortable. As you would, I suppose. 'I haven't seen the *Princess* for eight weeks or more,' he said. 'Meaning she may soon be back.'

We let him go and I mulled over the news. The *Princess* wasn't here … yet. We could stay, I decided. Bring the men ashore, make sure they behaved themselves, try not to attract too much attention …

Adewalé pulled me to one side. 'I grow tired of chasing these fantasies of yours, Edward. As does the crew.'

And that's all I need. Unrest in the bloody crew.

'Hang in there, man,' I reassured him, 'we're getting close.'

Meanwhile, I had an idea. Find Rogers and Benjamin …

By sticking close to the harbour I found them, and began tailing them, remembering what I'd been taught by Mary. Staying out of sight and using the sense to listen to their conversation.

'Have you alerted the men?' Woodes Rogers was saying, 'We're short on time.'

'Aye,' replied Hornigold, 'there'll be two soldiers waiting for us at the crossroads.'

‘Very good.’

Ah, a bodyguard. Now where might they be lurking?

Not wanting to be taken by surprise I glanced around. But by now Hornigold was speaking again. ‘If you don’t mind me asking, sir. What’s the meaning behind these blood samples we’re taking?’

‘Torres tells me that blood is required for the Observatory to properly function.’

‘How do you mean, sir?’

‘If one wishes to use the Observatory to, say … spy on King George, then one would require a drop of the king’s blood to do so. In other words, a small sample of blood gives us access to a man’s everyday life.’

Mumbo-jumbo. I paid it little mind at the time, but I’d regret that later.

‘Does Torres mean to spy on me, then?’ Benjamin was saying. ‘For I have just given him a sample of my own blood.’

‘As have I, Captain Hornigold. As will all Templars. As a measure of insurance.’

‘And trust, I reckon.’

‘Yes, but fear not. Torres has shipped our samples to a Templar safe house in Rio de Janeiro. We will not be the Observatory’s first subjects, I assure you.’

‘Aye, sir. I suppose it’s a small price to pay for what the Templars have given me in return.’

‘Precisely …’

And that is when I met the bodyguards: let’s call them brute number one and brute number two.

‘And what can we do for you?’

Ah, I thought, so these are the two soldiers you were talking about.

49

Brute number one is left-handed but wants me to think he'll lead with his right. Brute number two is not quite as combat-proficient. Too relaxed. Thinks I'm easily beaten.

'Now where would you be going?' said number one. 'Because my friend and I have been watching you, and you'll have to forgive me for saying, chief, but it looks awfully like you're following Mr Rogers and Mr Hornigold and listening in on their conversation … ?'

The Mr Rogers and Mr Hornigold in question were oblivious to the work their guards were doing on their behalf. That was good. What wasn't quite so good was that they were moving off, and I still had much to learn.

So get rid of these guys.

The advantage I had was my hidden blade. It was strapped to my right hand. My sword hung on that side, too, so I would reach for it with my left. An experienced swordsman would expect my attack to come from that side and would defend himself accordingly. Big brute number one, he was an experienced swordsman. I could see by the way he'd planted one foot slightly in front of the other and angled his body side-on (and yet, when the time came, would quickly switch feet, feinting to take me from a different side – I knew that too) and that's because big brute number one was expecting my sword to be drawn with my left hand. Neither knew I had a hidden blade, which would sprout from my right.

So we stared at one another. Mainly me and big brute number one. And then I made my move. Right hand outstretched as though in protection, but then – *engage blade, strike* – and brute number two was still reaching for his own sword when my blade pierced his neck. At the same time I'd snatched my sword from my belt with my left hand and was able to defend big brute number one's first attack, our swords clashing with the force of first impact.

Big brute number two gurgled and died, the blood pumping through fingers he held to his own throat, and now we were on equal footing. I brandished blade and sword at big brute number one and saw that the look he'd worn, a look of confidence – you might even say arrogance – had been replaced by fear.

He should have run. I probably would have caught him, but he should have run anyway. Should have tried to warn his lords and masters that a man was following them. A dangerous man. A man with the skills of an Assassin.

But he didn't run. He stood and stayed to fight, and though he was a man of skill, and he fought with more intelligence and more bravery than I was used to, it was that pride, on the streets of Kingston with a crowd of people looking on, a pride he could not bear to sacrifice that ultimately was his undoing. And when the end came, which it did, but only after a hard-fought battle, I made sure that for him the end was swift, his pain kept to a minimum.

The bystanders shrank back as I made my escape, swallowed up by the docks, hoping to catch Rogers and Hornigold. I made it, arriving at a quayside and crouching beside two drunks at the harbour wall as they met another man. Laureano Torres. They greeted each other with nods of the head. Supremely aware of their own importance. I ducked my head – *groan, had too much rum* – as his gaze swept past where I sat, and then he delivered his news.

'The *Princess* was taken by pirates six weeks ago,' he said. 'And insofar as we know the Sage Roberts was still aboard.'

I cursed to myself. If only the men knew how close they'd been to a short holiday in Kingston. Now, though, we were going to have to hunt pirates.

They started walking and I stood and joined the crowds, following, invisible. Using the sense. Hearing everything they said. 'What of the Sage's present location? Do we know?' asked Torres.

'Africa, Your Excellency,' said Rogers.

'Africa … By God, the winds do not favour that route.'

'I concur, Grand Master. I should have sailed there myself. One of my slave galleys would be more than capable of making a swift journey.'

'Slave galley?' said Torres, not happy, 'Captain, I asked you to divest yourself of that sick institution.'

'I fail to see the difference between enslaving some men and all men,' said Rogers. 'Our aim is to steer the entire course of civilization, is it not?'

'A body enslaved inspires the mind to revolt,' said Torres curtly, 'but enslave a man's mind and his body will trot along naturally.'

Rogers conceded. 'A fair point, Grand Master.'

Now they had reached the perimeter of the docks where they stopped at the entrance to a dilapidated warehouse, watching the activities inside the open door. Men seemed to be disposing of bodies, either clearing them from the warehouse or putting them to one side, perhaps for loading on to a cart or ship. Or, what was more likely, tipping them straight into the sea.

Torres asked the question I wanted answered myself. ‘What has happened here?’

Rogers smiled thinly. ‘These were men who resisted our generous requests for blood. Pirates and privateers mostly.’

Torres nodded. ‘I see.’

I tightened at the thought, looked at the bodies, crooked arms and crooked legs, unseeing eyes. Men no different to me.

‘I have been using my king’s pardon as an excuse to collect samples from as many men as possible,’ said Rogers. ‘And when they refuse, I hang them. All within the boundaries of my mandate, of course.’

‘Good. For if we cannot keep watch on all the world scoundrels, then the seas should be rid of them entirely.’

Now they moved on, heading towards the gangplank of a ship moored nearby. I followed, darting behind a stack of crates to listen.

‘Remind me,’ said Torres, ‘where in Africa are we looking?’

‘Principé, sir. A small island,’ said Hornigold.

Torres and Rogers strode up the gangplank but Hornigold hung back. Why? Why was he hanging back? And now I saw. With squinted eyes, the practised look of a seafarer, he scanned the horizon and studied the ships anchored like sentinels in the glittering ocean, and his eyes alighted on one ship in particular. And then with a lurch of shock, I realized where we were – and where we were was within sight of the *Jackdaw*.

Hornigold tensed, his hand went to the hilt of his sword and he turned round slowly. He was looking for me, I knew, guessing that wherever the *Jackdaw* was, I wouldn’t be far away.

‘Edward Kenway,’ he called out, as his gaze passed around the docks. ‘Imagine my surprise at seeing your *Jackdaw* anchored here. Have you heard all you came to hear? Will you now go and rescue the poor Sage from our clutching hands?’

In retrospect it was a bit rash, what I did next. But I was unable to think of anything but the fact that Benjamin had been one of us. One of my mentors. A friend of Edward Thatch. And now he worked to try to destroy us. All of that bubbled to the surface in a rage as I emerged from behind the crates to face him.

‘A pox on you traitor. You sold us down the river!’

‘Because I found a better path,’ said Hornigold. Instead of drawing his weapon he signalled with his hand. From the warehouse behind I heard the sound of swords being drawn.

Hornigold continued. ‘The Templars know order, discipline, structure. But you never could fathom these subtleties. Goodbye old friend! You were a soldier

once! When you fought for something real. Something beyond yourself!’

He left, almost breaking into a run. From the warehouse came his reinforcements and the men closed in behind him, forming a crescent around me.

Taking them by surprise I started quickly forward, grabbed a sailor who waved his sword to no particular effect and span him, using him as a shield and pushing him forward so that his boots skidded on the harbour stone.

At the same time there was the crack of a pistol and my human shield took a musket ball that was meant for me before I shoved him into the line of men and with my left hand snatched out my first pistol. I shot a heavy in the mouth, holstered it and snatched my second at the same time as I engaged the blade and sliced open a third man’s chest. Discharged the pistol. A wayward shot it nevertheless did the job and stopped a man bearing a cutlass and sent him falling to the ground with his hands at his stomach.

I crouched and whirled, taking the legs from beneath the next man, finished him with a quick and ruthless blade-punch to the chest. Then I was on my feet, scattering the last two men, their faces portraits in terror, not wishing to join their comrades dead or bleeding on the harbour floor, and ran for my rowing boat and to get back to the *Jackdaw*.

And as I worked the oars to where my ship was moored I could imagine the conversation with my quartermaster; how he’d remind me that the men didn’t approve of my quest.

They’d approve, though, once we found the Observatory. Once we found the Sage.

And it took me a month, but I did.

50

July, 1719

I found him on Principé, one afternoon, in a camp full of corpses.

Now, here's what learnt about the Sage, Bartholomew Roberts, some of which was later told to me by him, some by others.

Firstly, we had something in common: we were both Welsh, me from Swansea, him from Casnewydd Bach, and that he had changed his name from John to Bartholomew. That he had gone to sea when he was just thirteen, as a carpenter, before finding himself an object of interest for this secret society known as the Templars.

At the beginning of 1719, with the Templars *and* the Assassins on his tail, the Sage had found himself serving as a third mate on the *Princess*, just as I'd been told, under Captain Abraham Plumb.

As I'd learnt in Kingston, in early June the *Princess* had been attacked by pirates in *The Royal Rover* and *The Royal James*, led by captain Howell Davis. Somehow, Roberts, wily operator that he was, had inveigled himself in with Captain Howell Davis. He'd convinced the pirate captain, also a Welshman, as it happens, that he was a superb navigator, which he may well have been, but he was also able to talk to Captain Davis in Welsh, which created a further bond between the two men.

It was said that Bart Roberts was not keen on becoming a pirate at first. But as you'll see, he took to his new job like a duck to water.

And then they landed on Principé. The *Royal Rover*, this was, what with the *Royal James* having to be abandoned with worm damage. So, the *Royal Rover* headed for Principé, and by hoisting British colours, was allowed to dock, where the crew played the part of visiting English sailors.

Now, according to what I heard, Captain Davis came up with a plan. His plan was to invite the governor of Principé on board the *Rover* on the pretext of giving him lunch, and then as soon as he was aboard take him hostage and demand a huge ransom for his release.

Perfect. Couldn't fail.

But when Davis took men to meet the governor, they were ambushed at a camp along the way.

Which was where I came in.

I crept into the camp, into the deserted scene of the ambush, where the fire had burned down to red embers, one man actually lying in the dying embers, his corpse slowly cooking. Scattered around were more bodies. Some were soldiers, some were pirates.

'Captain Kenway?' came a voice and I span round to see him there: the Sage. Perhaps I would have been pleased to see him; perhaps I would have thought my journey was at an end. If he hadn't been pointing a gun at me.

At the insistence of his gun barrel I put my hands in the air.

'Another dire situation, Roberts. We must stop meeting like this.'

He smiled grimly. Does he bear me any ill will? I wondered. He had no idea of my plans, after all. A crazy part of me realized that I wouldn't have been surprised if he could read minds.

'Stop tailing me and your wish would come true,' he said.

'There's no need for this. You know I'm as good as my word.'

Around us the jungle was silent. Bartholomew Roberts seemed to be thinking. It was odd, I mused. Neither of us really had the measure of the other. Neither of us really knew what the other one wanted. I knew what I wanted from him, of course. But what about him? What did he want? I sensed that whatever it was, it would be more dark and more mysterious than I could possibly imagine. All I knew for sure was that death followed Bart Roberts and I wasn't ready to die. Not yet.

He spoke. 'Our Captain Howell was killed today in a Portuguese ambush. Headstrong fool. I warned him not to come ashore.'

It was to the recently deceased captain that Bartholomew Roberts went now. Evidently deciding I was not a threat as he holstered his pistol.

And of course. The attack. I thought I knew who was behind it.

'It was orchestrated by the Templars,' I told him. 'The same sort who took you to Havana.'

His long hair shook as he nodded, seeming to think at the same time. 'I see now there is no escaping the Templars' attention, is there? I suppose it is time to fight back?'

Now you're talking, I thought.

As we'd been speaking I'd watched him peel off his sailor's rags and pull on first the breeches of the dead captain and then the shirt. The shirt was bloodstained so he discarded it, put his own back on, then hunched his shoulders into the captain's coat. He pulled the tie from his hair and shook it free. He

popped the captain's tricorne on his head and its feather wafted as he turned to face me. This was a different Bartholomew Roberts. His time aboard ship had put health back in his cheeks. His dark, curly locks shone in the sun and he stood resplendent in a red jacket and breeches, white stockings, with a hat to match. He looked every inch the buccaneer. He looked every inch the pirate captain.

'Now,' he said, 'we must go before Portuguese reinforcements arrive. We must get back to the *Rover*. I have an announcement to make there, that I'd like you to witness.'

I thought I knew what it was, and I was surprised in one way – he was but a lowly deckhand, after all – but unsurprised also, because this was Roberts. The Sage. And the tricks up his sleeve were never-ending. (Watch yourself, Kenway. He's dangerous.) And sure enough when we arrived at the *Rover*, where the men waited nervously for news of the expedition, he leapt up to a crate to command their attention. They goggled at him up there: the lowly deckhand, a new arrival on board to boot, now resplendent in the captain's clothes.

'In honest service there are thin commons, low wages, and hard labour. Yet as gentlemen of fortune we enjoy plenty and satisfaction, pleasure and ease, liberty and power … so what man with a sensible mind would choose the former life, when the only hazard we pirates run is a sour look from those without strength or splendour.

'Now, I have been among you six weeks, and in that time have adopted your outlook as my own, and with so fierce a conviction, that it may frighten you to see your passions reflected from me in so stark a light. But … if it's a captain you see in me now, aye then … I'll be your bloody captain!'

You had to hand it to him, it was a rousing speech. In a few short sentences proclaiming his kinship, he had these men eating out of the palm of his hand. As the meeting broke up I approached, deciding now was the time to make my play.

'I'm looking for the Observatory,' I told him. 'Folks say you're the only man that can find it.'

'Folks are correct.'

He looked me up and down as if to confirm his impressions. 'Despite my distaste for your eagerness, I see in you a touch of untested genius.' He held out his hand to shake. 'I'm Bartholomew Roberts.'

'Edward.'

'I've no secrets to share with you now,' he told me.

I stared at him, unable to believe what I was hearing. He was going to make me wait.

51

September, 1719

Damn the man. Damn Roberts.

He wanted me to wait two months. *Two whole months.* Then meet him west of the Leeward islands, east of Puerto Rico. With only his word to take for that, I sailed the *Jackdaw* back to San Inagua. There I rested the crew for a while, and we took prizes when we could, and my coffers swelled, and it was during that period, I think, that I cut off the nose of the ship's cook.

And when we weren't taking prizes and when I wasn't slicing off noses, I brooded at my homestead. I wrote letters to Caroline in which I assured her I would soon be returning as a man of wealth, and I fretted over the Observatory, only too aware that with it lay all my hopes of a fortune. And it was built on nothing more than a promise from Bartholomew Roberts.

And then what? To my one-track mind, the Observatory was a place of enormous potential wealth. But even if I found it – even if Bart Roberts came good on his word – it remained a source of *potential* wealth. Wasn't it Edward who had scoffed at the very idea? Gold doubloons was what we wanted, he'd said. Perhaps he was right. Even if I found this amazing machine, how the bloody hell was I going to convert it into the wealth I hoped to acquire? After all, if there were riches to be made, then why hadn't Roberts made them?

Because he has some other purpose.

And I thought of my parents. My mind went back to the burning of our farmhouse and I thought anew of striking a blow at the Templars, this secret society who used their influence and power to grind down anyone who displeased them; to exercise a grudge. I still had no idea exactly who was behind the burning of my farmhouse. Or why. Was it a grudge against me for marrying Caroline and humiliating Matthew Hague? Or against my father, mere business rivalry? Probably both, was my suspicion. Perhaps the Kenways, these arrivals from Wales, who had shamed them so, simply deserved to be taken down a peg or two.

I would find out for sure, I decided. I would return to Bristol one day, and exact my revenge.

And on that I brooded, too. Until the day came in September when I gathered the crew and we readied the *Jackdaw*, newly caulked, its masts and rigging repaired, its shrouds ready, its galley stocked and the munitions at capacity, and we set sail for our appointment with Bartholomew Roberts.

As I say, I don't think I ever truly knew what was on his mind. He had his own agenda, and wasn't about to share it with me. What he did like to do, however, was keep me guessing. Keep me hanging on. When we'd parted he'd told me he had business to attend to, which I later found out involved taking his own crew back to Principé and exacting his revenge for the death of Captain Howell Davis on the people of the island.

They'd attacked at night, put to the sword as many men as they could, and made off, not only with as much treasure as they could carry but the beginnings of Black Bart's fearsome reputation: unknowable, brave and ruthless, and apt to carry off daring raids. The one we were about to carry out, for example. The one that began with Roberts insisting the *Jackdaw* join him on a jaunt around the coast of Brazil to the Todos os Santos Bay.

We didn't have long to find out the reason why. A fleet of no fewer than forty-two Portuguese merchant ships. What's more with no navy escorts. Roberts lost no time in capturing one of the outlying vessels to 'hold talks' with the captain. It wasn't something I got involved with, but from the bruised Portuguese naval officer he'd learnt that the flagship had on it a chest, a coffer that, he told me, contained 'crystal vials filled with blood. You may remember.'

Vials of blood. How could I forget?

We anchored the *Jackdaw* and I took Adewalé and a skeleton crew to join Roberts on his purloined Portuguese vessel. Up to now we'd remained at the fringes of the fleet, but now it seemed to split up, and we saw our chance. The flagship was testing her guns.

Anchored some distance away we watched, and Bartholomew looked at me.

'Are you stealthy, Edward Kenway?'

'That I am,' I said.

He looked over to the Portuguese galleon. It was anchored not far away from land with most of the crew on the gun deck firing inland, carrying out exercises. Never was there a better time to steal aboard, so at a nod from Bart Roberts I dived overboard and swam to the galleon, on a mission of death.

Shinning up a Jacob's ladder I found myself on deck, where I moved quietly along the planks to the first man, engaged my blade, swept it quickly across his throat then helped him to the deck and held my hand over his mouth while he died.

All the time I kept my eyes on the lookouts and crow's-nest above.

I disposed of a second sentry the same way then began scaling the rigging to the crow's-nest. There a lookout scanned the horizon, his spyglass moving from left to right, past Roberts's ship and then back again.

He focused on Roberts's vessel, his gaze lingered on it, and I wondered if his suspicions were churning. Perhaps so. Perhaps he was wondering why the men on board didn't *look* like Portuguese merchants. He seemed to decide. He lowered the spyglass and I could see his chest inflate as though he were about to call out, just as I sprang into the lookout position, grabbed his arm and slid my blade into his armpit.

I swept my other arm across his neck to silence any cries as blood gushed from beneath his arm and he breathed his last as I let him fold to the well of the crow's-nest.

Now Bart's ship came alongside, and as I descended the ratlines the two ships bumped and his men began pouring over the sides.

A hatch in the quarterdeck opened and the Portuguese appeared, but they stood no chance. Their throats were cut, their bodies thrown overboard. And in a matter of a few bloody moments the galleon was controlled by Bart Roberts's men. Fat lot of good their gun training had done.

Everything that could be pillaged was pillaged. A deckhand who dragged the coffer on deck and grinned at his captain, hoping for some words of praise got none, Roberts ignoring him and indicating for the chest to be loaded on his stolen ship.

Then, suddenly, came a shout from the lookouts, 'Sail ho!' and in the next instant we were piling back to the stolen ship, some of the slow men even falling to the sea as Roberts's ship pulled away from the flagship and we set sail, two Portuguese naval warships bearing down upon us.

There was the pop of muskets but they were too far away to do any damage. Thank God we were in a stolen Portuguese ship; they had no desire to fire their carriage guns at us. Not yet. Probably they hadn't worked it out yet. Probably they were still wondering what the bloody hell was going on.

We came around the bay, sails pregnant with wind, men dashing below decks to man the guns. Ahead of us was anchored the *Jackdaw*, and I prayed that Adewalé had ordered lookouts. I thanked God my quartermaster was an Adewalé and not a Calico Jack, and so would have made sure the lookouts were

posted. And I prayed that those lookouts would at this very moment be relaying the news that Roberts's vessel was speeding towards them with the Portuguese navy in pursuit and that they would be manning their positions and weighing anchor.

They were.

Even though we were being pursued I still had time to admire what to my eyes is one of the most beautiful sights of the sea. The *Jackdaw*, men on its rigging, its sails unfurling gracefully, being secured, then blooming with a noise I could hear even from my vantage point far away.

Still, our speed meant we caught them smartly, just as the *Jackdaw* was gaining speed herself, and after exchanging quick words with Roberts I stood on the poop deck and my mind returned to the sight of Duncan Walpole, he who had begun this whole journey, as I leapt from the poop of Roberts's ship back on to the *Jackdaw*.

'Ah, there's nothing like the hot winds of hell blowing in your face!' I heard Roberts cry as I crouched and watched as our two vessels peeled apart. I gave orders to man the stern guns below. The Portuguese reluctance to open fire was over, but their hesitancy had cost them dear, for it was the *Jackdaw* who took first blood.

I heard our stern guns boom then spin back across the deck below. I saw hot metal speed over the face of the ocean and slam into the leading ship, saw splinters fly from jagged holes in the bow and along the hull, men and bits of men joining the debris already littering the sea. The bow gained wings of foam as it dipped and I could imagine the scene below decks, men at the pumps, but the vessel already shipping too much water and soon …

She turned in the water, listing, her sails flattening. A cheer went up from my men but from around her came the second ship, and that was when Bartholomew Roberts decided to test his own guns.

His shot found its mark, just as mine had, and once more we were treated to the sight of the Portuguese vessel ploughing on, even as the bowstring dipped and the bows sunk, her hull looking as though they had been the victim of a giant shark attack.

Soon both ships were seriously floundering, the second one more badly damaged than the first and boats were being launched, men were jumping over the side and the Portuguese navy had, for the time being at least, forgotten about us.

We sailed, celebrating for some hours until Roberts commanded both vessels drop anchor and I stood alert on the quarterdeck wondering, What now?

I'd primed my pistols and my blade was at the ready, and via Adewalé I'd told the crew that if there were any signs of a double-cross they were to fight to save themselves, don't surrender to Roberts, no matter what. I'd seen how he treated those he considered his enemy. I'd seen how he treated his prisoners.

Now, though, he called me across, having his men on the rack lines swing me a line so that first I, then Adewalé could cross to his ship. I stood on the deck and faced him, a tension in the air so thick you could almost taste it, because if Roberts did plan to betray us, then now was the time. My hand flexed at my blade mechanism.

Roberts, though, whatever he was planning, and it was safe to say that he was planning *something*, it wasn't for now. At a word from him, two of his crewmates came forward with the chest we had liberated from the Portuguese flagship.

'Here's my prize,' said Roberts, with his eyes on me. It was a coffer full of blood. That was what he had promised. Hardly the grand prize I was after. But we would see. We would see.

The two hands set down the chest and opened it. As the crew gathered round to watch us. I was reminded of the day I had fought Blaney on the deck of Edward Thatch's galleon. They did the same now. They clambered on the mast and in the rigging and stood on the gunwales in order to get a better look as their captain reached into the chest, picked out one of the vials and examined it in the light.

A murmur of disappointment ran around those watching. No gold for you, lads. No silver pieces of eight. Sorry. Just vials that probably to the untrained eye might have been wine but that I knew were blood.

Oblivious to his crew's disappointment and no doubt uncaring of it anyway, Roberts was examining the vials, one by one.

'Ah, the Templars have been busy I see …' he replaced a vial with nimble fingers that danced over the glittering crystals as he picked out another one, held it up to the light and examined it. Around us the men, disconsolate with the turn of events, descended the ratlines, jumped down from the gunwales and returned to their business.

Roberts squinted as he held up yet another crystal.

'Laurens Prins's blood,' he said, then tossed it to me. 'Useless now.'

I stared carefully at it as Robert cycled quickly through the contents of the coffer, calling out names, 'Woodes Rogers. Ben Hornigold. Even Torres himself. Small quantities, kept for a special purpose.'

Something to do with the Observatory. But what? The time for taunting me with promises was over. I felt anger beginning to rise. Most of his men had gone

back to work, the quartermaster and first mate stood nearby, but I had Adewalé. Maybe, just maybe, it was time to show Bartholomew Roberts how serious I was. Maybe it was time to show him that I was sick and tired of being messed around. Maybe it was time to use my blade to *insist* he told me what I wanted.

'You must take me to the Observatory, Roberts,' I said firmly, 'I need to know what it is.'

Roberts twinkled. 'To what end, hey? Will you sell it from under my nose? Or work with me and use it to bolster our gains?'

'Whatever improves my lot in life,' I said guardedly.

He closed the chest with a snap and placed both hands on the curved lid. 'How ridiculous. A merry life and a short life that's my motto. It's all the optimism I can muster.'

He seemed to consider. I held my breath. Again that thought, *What now?* And then he looked at me and the mischievous look in his eyes had departed, in its place a blank stare. 'All right, Captain Kenway. You've earned a look.'

I smiled.

At last.

52

‘Can you feel it, Adewalé,’ I said to him, as we followed the *Rover* around the coast of Brazil. ‘We’re moments away from the grandest prize of all.’

‘I feel nothing but hot wind in my ears, captain,’ he said enigmatically, face in the wind, sipping at the breeze.

I looked at him. Once again I felt almost overpowered with admiration for him. Here was a man who had probably saved my life on hundreds of occasions and definitely saved my life on at least three. Here was the most loyal, committed and talented quartermaster a captain could ever have; who had escaped slavery yet still had to deal with the jibes of common mutineers like Calico Jack, who thought themselves above him because of his colour. Here was a man who had overcome all the bilge life had thrown at him, and it was a lot of bilge, the kind that only a man sold as a slave will ever know. A man who stood by my side on the *Jackdaw* day after day and demanded no great prizes, no rich-making haul, demanded little but the respect he deserved, enough of the shares to live on, a place to rest his head, and a meal made by a cook without a nose.

And how had I repaid this man?

By going on and on and on about the Observatory.

And still going on about it.

‘Come on, man. When we take this treasure, we’ll be set for life. All of us. Ten times over.’

He nodded. ‘As you wish.’

By now the *Jackdaw* was not far from the *Rover* and I looked across the deck to see their captain, just as he looked over to see me.

‘Ahoy Roberts!’ I called. ‘We’ll cast anchor and meet ashore.’

‘You were followed, Captain Kenway. How long for? I wonder.’

I snatched the spyglass from Adewalé and scuttled up the ratlines, shouldering aside the lookout in the crow’s-nest and putting the spyglass to my eye.

‘What do you think that is, lad?’ I snarled at the lookout.

He was young – as young as I was when I first joined the crew of the *Emperor*. ‘It’s a ship, sir, but there are plenty of vessels in these waters, and I didn’t think it close enough to raise the alarm.’

I snapped the glass shut and glared at him. ‘You didn’t think at all, did you? That ship out there isn’t any other ship, son, it’s the *Benjamin*.’

The lad paled.

‘Aye, that’s right, the *Benjamin*. Captained by one Benjamin Hornigold. If they’ve not caught up with us, then it’s because they haven’t wanted to catch up with us.’

I began to make my way down the ratlines.

‘Call it then, lad,’ I shouted up to the lookout. ‘Sound the alarm, late as it is.’

‘Sail ho!

The Cuban coastline was to our starboard, the *Benjamin* behind us. But now I was at the tiller, and I hauled her over, the rudder complaining as she turned, the men reaching for a handhold as our masts swung, our port side dipped and we began to come around, until the manoeuvre was complete and the men were bitching and moaning as the oars were deployed, the sails reefed and we began a trudge aimed at meeting the *Benjamin* head on. *You won’t be expecting that, will you, Benjamins?*

‘Captain, think carefully about what you mean to do here,’ said Adewalé.

‘What are you grousing about, Adewalé? It’s Ben Hornigold come to kill us out there.’

‘Aye, and that traitor needs to die. But what then? Can you say with certainty that you deserve the Observatory more than he and his Templars?’

‘No, I can’t. And I don’t care to try. But if you’ve a better idea, by all means tell me.’

‘Forget working with Roberts,’ he said with a sudden surge of passion, something I’d rarely seen from him, such a cool head usually. ‘Tell the Assassins. Bring them here, and let them protect the Observatory.’

‘Aye, I’ll bring them here. If they’re willing to pay me a good sum for it, I will.’

He made a disgusted noise and walked away.

Ahead of us the *Benjamin* had turned – Hornigold with no stomach for a fight, it seemed – and we saw the men in her masts securing the sails. Oars appeared and were soon spanking the water, our two ships in a rowing race now. For long moments all I could hear was the shout of the coxswain, the creak of the ship, the splash of the sweepers in the water, as I stood at the bow of the *Jackdaw* and Hornigold stood at the stern of the *Benjamin*, and we stared at one another.

As we raced, the sun dipped below the horizon, flickering orange, the last of its light as night fell and brought with it a wind from the north west that dragged fog inland. The *Benjamin* anticipated the wind with more success than we did.

The first we knew of it was seeing her sails unfurl, and she put distance between them and us.

Some fifteen minutes later, it was dark and fog billowed in towards that part of the Cuban coastline they call the Devil's Backbone, crags that look like the spine of a giant behemoth, a moon giving the mist a ghostly glow.

'We'll have a hard fight if Hornigold draws us any deeper into this fog,' warned Adewalé.

That was Hornigold's plan, though, but he'd made a mistake, and a big mistake for such an experienced sailor. He found himself being hustled by the wind. It rushed in from the open sea, it charged at cross-purposes along the coast, turning the sandbanks of the Devil's Backbone into a haze of impenetrable layers of fog and sand.

'The winds are tossing them about like a toy,' said Adewalé.

I pulled up the cowl of my robes against the chill wind which had just begun to assault us as we came within its range.

'We can use that to get close.'

He looked at me. 'If we are not dashed to pieces as well.'

Now the sails were rolled up again, but on the *Benjamin* they weren't so quick. They were being buffeted by the wind. I saw men trying to reef the sails but finding it tough in the conditions. One fell, his scream carried to us by the gusts.

The *Benjamin* was in trouble. It bobbled on an increasingly choppy sea, buffeted by the wind that snatched at its sails, turning it first one way then another. It veered close towards the banks of the Backbone. Men scurried about the decks. Another was blown off board. They'd lost control. At the mercy of the elements now.

I stood on the forecastle deck, one hand braced and the other held out, feeling the wind on my palm. I felt the pressure of the hidden blade on my forearm and knew it would taste the blood of Hornigold before the night was old.

'Can you do this, breddah? Is your heart up for it?'

Benjamin Hornigold, who had taught me so much about the ways of the sea. Benjamin Hornigold, the man who had established, who had mentored my greatest friend Edward Thatch, who in turn had mentored me. Actually, I didn't know if I could.

'Truth be told, I was hoping the sea would swallow him up, and see the job done for me,' I told him. 'But I'll do what I must.'

My quartermaster. God bless my quartermaster. He knew the fate of the *Benjamin* before even the Fates knew of the fate of the *Benjamin*. And as it crashed sidelong into a high bankside, seemingly wrenched from the sea by a

gust of wind and spirited into a cloud of sand and fog, he saw to it that we drew alongside.

We saw the shapes of crewmen tumbling from her top decks, figures indistinct in the murk. I stepped up to the gunwale of the forecastle deck braced with one hand on the bow strip then used the sense, just as James Kidd had shown me. And among those falling bodies of men who slipped from the deck of the ship on to the boggy sandbanks and into the water, I was able to make out the form of Benjamin Hornigold. Over my shoulder I said, ‘I’ll be coming back.’

And then I jumped.

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The snap of muskets from the *Jackdaw* began behind me as a one-sided battle between my ship and the crew of the now-beached *Benjamin*. My senses had returned to normal, but Hornigold was doing me a favour, shouting encouragement and curses to his men.

‘Some mighty piss-poor sailing back there, lads. And if we live out this day, by God, I’m flaying every last bitch of you. Hold your ground and be ready for anything.’

And then I appeared from the mist on the bank nearby, and rather than heed his own words he took to his heels, scrambling along to the top of the incline and then across it.

My men had started to use mortars on the fleeing crew of the *Benjamin*, though, and I found myself placed in danger as they began raining on to the sand around me. Until one exploded near Benjamin and the next thing I knew he was disappearing out of sight over the other side of the sandbank in a spray of blood and sand.

I scrambled over the top made hasty by my desire to see his fate, and paid for it with a sword swipe across my arm, opening a cut that bled. In a single movement I span, engaged the blade and met his next attack, our steel sparking as it met. The force of his attack was enough to send me tumbling down the bank and he came after me, launching himself from the slope with his cutlass swinging. I caught him on my boots and kicked him away, his sword point parting the air before my nose. Rolling I pulled myself to my feet and scrambled after him, and again our blades met. For some moments we traded blows, and he was good, but he was hurt and I was the younger man, and I was lit by vengeful fire and so, I cut his arm, his elbow, his shoulder – until he could hardly stand or raise his sword and I finished him.

‘You could have been a man who stood for something true,’ he said as he died. His lips worked over the words carefully. His teeth were bloodstained. ‘But you’ve a killer’s heart now.’

‘Well, it’s a damn sight better than what you have, Ben,’ I told him. ‘The heart of a traitor, who thinks himself better than his mates.’

‘Aye, and proven true. What have you done since Nassau fell? Nothing but murder and mayhem.’

I lost my temper, rounded on him. ‘You threw in with the very kind we once hated!’ I shouted.

‘No,’ he said. He reached to grab at me and make his point, but I angrily batted his hands away. ‘These Templars are different. I wish you could see that. But if you continue on your present course, you’ll find you’re the only one left walking it. With the gallows at the end.’

‘That may be,’ I said, ‘but now the world has one less snake in it. And that’s enough for me.’

But he didn’t hear me. He was already dead.

54

‘Is the pirate hunter dead?’ said Bartholomew Roberts.

I looked at him, Bartholomew Roberts, this unknowable character, a Sage, a carpenter who had turned to a life of piracy. Was this the first time he’d visited the Observatory? Why did he need me here? So many questions – questions to which I knew I would never be given answers.

We were at Long Bay, on the northern shores of Jamaica. He had been loading his pistols as I arrived. Then he asked his question to which I replied, ‘Aye, by my own hand.’

He nodded and went back to cleaning his pistols. I looked at him and found a sudden rage gripped me. ‘Why is it you alone can find what so many want?’

He chuckled. ‘I was born with memories of this place. Memories of another time entirely, I think. Like … Like another life I have already led.’

I shook my head, and wondered whether I would ever be free of this mumbo-jumbo.

‘Curse you for a lurch, man, and speak some sense.’

‘Not today.’

Nor any other day, I thought angrily, but before I could find a reply there came a noise from the jungle.

Natives? Perhaps they had been disturbed by the battle between the *Jackdaw* and the *Benjamin*. Remained of Hornigold’s crew was being herded aboard the *Jackdaw* and I had left my men to it. *Deal with the prisoners and await my return shortly*. I had embarked on this meeting with Bartholomew Roberts alone.

He gestured to me. ‘After you, captain. The path ahead is dangerous.’

With around a dozen of his men we began to move through the jungle, beating a path through the undergrowth as we began to head upwards. I wondered whether I should be able to see it by now, this Observatory? Weren’t they great constructs, built on high peaks? All around the hillsides greenery waved at us. Bushes and palm trees. Nothing as far as the eye can see, unless you counted our ships in the bay.

We had been going only a few hundred yards when we heard a sound from the undergrowth and something streaked from the bushes to one side of us and one

of Roberts's men fell with a glistening, gore-filled hole where the back of his head had been. I know a club strike when I see one. But it was gone as quickly as it had come.

A tremor of fear ran through the crew who drew their swords, pulled muskets from their backs and snatched pistols from their belts. Crouched. Ready.

'The men native to this land will put up a fight, Edward,' said Roberts quietly, eyes scanning the undergrowth, which was silent, keeping its secrets.

'You willing to push back if necessary? To kill, if needed?'

I engaged my hidden blade.

'You'll hear from me soon.'

And then I crouched, rolled sideways into the jungle and became a part of it.

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The natives, they knew their land well, but I was doing something they simply would not expect, I was taking the fight to them. And so, the first man I came across was surprised to see me, and that surprise was his undoing. He wore nothing but a breech cloth, his black hair tied up on his head, a club still gleaming with the blood of a buccaneer upon it, and eyes wide with shock. The natives were only protecting what was theirs. It gave me no pleasure to slide my blade between his ribs and I hoped his end was quick, but I did it anyway, and then moved on. The jungle began to resound to the noise of screams and gunshots, but I found more natives and dealt more death until at last the battle was over and I returned to the main party.

Eight had been killed in the battle. Most of the natives had fallen under my blade.

'The guardians of the Observatory,' Bartholomew Roberts told me.

'How long have their kind being here?' I asked him.

'Oh … At least a thousand years or more. Very dedicated men. Very deadly.'

I looked around at what remained of his group, his terrified, traumatized men, who had watched their shipmates picked off one by one. Then we continued our journey, climbing still, going up and up until we came upon it, grey stone walls a dark contrast with the vibrant jungle colours, a monolithic building rising way, way above us.

The Observatory.

How had it not been seen? I wondered. How had it remained invisible?

'This is it, then?'

'Aye, an almost sacred place. All it needs is a drop of my blood …'

In his hand appeared a small dagger and he never took his eyes from mine as he used it to prick his thumb then placed the red-beaded finger into a tiny recess by the side of the door. It began to open.

All six of us looked at one another. Only Bart Roberts seemed to be enjoying himself.

'And the door opens,' he said with the voice of a showman, 'after almost eighty thousand years.'

He stepped to one side and ushered his men through. The nervous crew members looked at one another then did as their captain ordered and began to move towards the door …

And then, for some reason known only to himself, Roberts killed them, all four of them. With one hand he buried his dagger into the eye socket of the leading man, pushing his body aside at the same time as he drew his pistol and fired into the face of the second man. The last two crew members had no time to react as Black Bart drew his second pistol and fired point-blank into the chest of a third man, pulled his sword and ran the final survivor through.

It was the same man who had brought the chest on deck, who'd looked to Roberts for some words of praise. He made an odd, choking sound and Roberts held him there a second then slid the cutlass home to the hilt and twisted it. The body on his blade went taut and the deckhand looked at his captain with imploring, uncomprehending eyes until his body relaxed, slid off the steel and thumped to the ground, chest rising once, twice, then staying still.

So much death. *So much death*.

'Jesus, Roberts, have you gone mad?'

He shook blood from his cutlass then fussily cleaned it with a handkerchief.

'Quite the contrary, Edward. These wags would have gone mad at seeing what lies beyond this gate. But you, I suspect, are made of sterner stuff. Now pick up that chest and carry it hither.'

I did as he asked. Knowing that to follow Roberts was a bad idea. *A terrible bloody idea*. But unable to prevent myself doing it. I'd come too far to back out now.

Inside it was like an ancient temple. 'Dirty and decrepit,' said Roberts, 'not quite as I remember. But it has been over eighty millennia.'

I shot him a glare. *More mumbo-jumbo*. 'Oh rot, that's impossible.'

His look in return was unknowable. 'Step as if on thin ice, captain.'

On stone steps we descended through the centre of the Observatory, moving into a large bridge chamber. All my senses were alive as I looked around and took in the vast openness of the space.

'Beautiful, isn't it?' said Roberts in a hushed voice.

'Aye,' I replied and found I was whispering, 'like something out of a fairy tale, one of them old poems.'

'There were many stories about this place once. Tales that turned into rumours, and again into legend. The inevitable process of facts becoming fictions, before fading away entirely.'

And now we entered a new room altogether, what could only be described as an archive, a huge space lined with low shelves on which were stacked hundreds

of small vials of blood, just like the ones in the coffer – just like the one I had seen Torres use on Bartholomew Roberts.

‘More blood vials.’

‘Yes. These cubes contain the blood of an old and ancient people. A wonderful race, in their time.’

‘The more you talk, man, the less I understand,’ I said irritably.

‘Only remember this; the blood in these vials is not worth a single reale to anyone any more. It may be again, one day. But not in this epoch.’

We were deep within the bowels of the earth now, and walked through the archives into what was the main theatre of the Observatory. Again it was astounding and we stood for a second, craning our necks to gaze from one side of the vast domed chamber to the other.

At one side of the chamber was what looked like a pit, with just a sloshing sound from far below to indicate water somewhere, while in the middle was a raised dais with what looked a complicated pattern carved into the stone. As Roberts bid me place the chest down a low noise began. A low, humming sound that was intriguing at first but began to build …

‘What’s that?’ I felt as though I was having to shout to make myself heard, although I wasn’t.

‘Ah yes,’ said Roberts, ‘a security measure. Just a moment.’

Around us the walls had begun to glow, letting off a pulsing white light that was as beautiful as it was unsettling. The Sage walked across the floor to the raised platform in the middle and put his hand to a carved indent in the centre. Straight away the sound receded and the room around us was silent again, though the walls still glowed.

‘So what is this place?’ I said to Roberts.

‘Think of it as like a large spyglass. A device capable of seeing great distances.’

The glow. The blood. This ‘device’. My head was beginning to spin, and all I could do was stand and watch openmouthed as Roberts reached into the coffer with practised fingers, as though it what this was something he’d done dozens of times before, and then pulled out a vial and held it up to the light, just as he had on the day we took possession of the chest.

Satisfied, he bent to the raised dais in front of him and placed the crystal inside. And then, something happened – something I still can’t quite believe – the glow on the walls seemed to ripple like mist, coalescing, not into fog but into images, a series of opaque pictures, as though I was looking through a window at something, at …

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Calico Jack Rackham, as I live and breathe.

But I wasn't looking *at* him. No. It was as though I *was* him. As though I was looking through his eyes. In fact, the only reason I knew it was Calico Jack was the Indian fabric of his coat sleeve.

He was walking up the steps towards the Old Avery. My heart leapt to see the old place, even more careworn and dilapidated than ever before …

Which meant that this wasn't an image from the past. It wasn't an image I had ever experienced myself, because I'd never seen the Old Avery in its current state of disrepair. Hadn't visited Nassau since the true rot set in.

And yet … And yet … I *was* seeing it.

'*This is bloody witchcraft,*' I spluttered.

'No. This is Calico Jack Rackham … Somewhere in the world at this moment.'

'Nassau,' I said as much to him as to myself. 'This is happening right now? We're seeing through his eyes?'

'Aye,' said Roberts.

It wasn't as though I returned my attention to the image. It was simply there in front of me. As if I was part of it, inside it. Which in a way I was, because when Calico Jack turned his head the image moved with him. I watched as he looked towards a table where Anne Bonny sat with James Kidd.

A long, lingering glance over Anne Bonny. Over certain *parts* of Anne Bonny. The dirty bastard. But then, oh my God, she looked over from the table where she sat with James Kidd and returned his look. And I mean a proper lascivious look. That roving eye I told you about? She was giving old Calico Jack the full benefit.

Bloody hell. They're having an affair.

Despite everything – despite the wonders of the Observatory – I found myself suppressing a chuckle to think of James Bonny, that treacherous turncoat, wearing the horns. Calico Jack? Well, the poxy git had marooned me, hadn't he? So there was no love lost there. But he did give us our weapons, ammunition and grub, and, well, he did have Anne warming his bed, so you had to hand it to him.

Now Calico Jack was listening to Anne and James chatting.

‘I don’t know, Jim,’ Anne was saying. ‘I haven’t the faintest idea how to pilot a ship. That ain’t work a woman does.’

What on earth were they cooking up?

‘Tosh. I’ve seen a score of ladies who can reef a sail and spin a capstan.’

‘And would you teach me to fight? With a cutlass, like? And maybe how to handle a pistol?’

‘All that and more. But you have to want it. And work for it. There’s no stumbling into true success.’

And now Calico Jack confirmed what I thought. His disembodied voice seemed to echo off the stone. ‘Oi, lad, that’s my lass yer making love to. Lay off or I’ll cut ya.’

‘Up your arse, Rackham. “Lad” is the last thing you should be calling me …’

Oh yes? I thought. Was James Kidd about to reveal her disguise?

James was reaching beneath his/her shirt and Calico Jack was blustering, ‘Oh, is that right … lad?’

Roberts removed the cube from the Observatory controls and the image evaporated.

I bit my lip and thought of the *Jackdaw*. Adé didn’t like our current situation. He’d be dying to make sail.

But he wouldn’t do it without me.

Would he?

But now the glow that hung in the chamber before us became something else again, and all thoughts of the *Jackdaw*’s intentions were forgotten as Roberts said, ‘Let’s try another. Governor Woodes Rogers,’ and placed another crystal cube into the console and new images formed.

We were seeing through the eyes of Woodes Rogers. Standing with him was Torres and not far away was El Tiburón. Suddenly the vision was filled with the image of a blood vial being held up for examination by Rogers.

He was speaking. ‘You have a bold idea. But I must think it carefully through.’

The Observatory chamber room filled with the sound of Torres’s reply.

‘A simple pledge of loyalty is all you need suggest to the House of Commons. An oath, a gesture and a simple ceremonial dram of blood taken from the finger. That’s all.’

Christ. Whatever Anne and Mary had been cooking up, it was nothing compared to this lot. Still trying to control the bleeding world – bleeding being the operative world. And doing it how? The English parliament.

Now Rogers was speaking. ‘The ministers may give me trouble, but it should be easy enough to convince the House of Lords. They do adore an excess of pomp and circumstance.’

‘Exactly. Tell them it’s a show of fealty to the king … against those revolting Jacobites.’

‘Yes, indeed,’ replied Rogers.

‘The crucial detail is the blood. You must get a sample from each man. We want to be ready when we find the Observatory.’

‘Agreed.’

Roberts removed the cube from the console and looked at me, triumph in his eyes. Now we knew what the Templars were plotting. Not only that, but we were one step ahead of them.

The images had gone, the strange glow had returned to the walls and I was left wondering if I’d imagined the whole thing. Meantime, Roberts pulled something from the console and held it aloft. A skull. The skull in which he’d placed the vials of blood.

‘A precious tool, you see?’

‘Sorcery, that’s what it is,’ I said.

‘Not so. Every mechanism that gives this device its light is a true and physical thing. Ancient, yes, but nothing supernatural or strange.’

I looked doubtfully at him, thinking, *You’re kidding yourself, mate*. But decided not to pursue it.

‘We’ll be masters of the ocean with that,’ I said. Wanting to hold the skull, reaching out to take it from him and overcome with the desire to feel the weight of it in my palm, I felt a tremble as he came forward with it, his hand outstretched. But then, instead of giving it to me, he whipped it round, striking me in the face with it and knocking me across the floor of the Observatory and over the precipice of the pit.

I fell, slamming into the stone on the way down, whipped by the vegetation that clung to the rock face but unable to get a grip on it and stop my fall. I felt a searing pain in my side, then smacked into the water below, thanking God I had the presence of mind to turn my fall into the semblance of a dive. From that height that instinct might have saved my life.

Even so my entrance into the water was a messy one. I crashed into it and floundered, swallowing water, trying not to let the pain in my side drag me under. As I broke the surface and gasped for breath I looked up, only to see Roberts gazing down on me.

‘There’s nothing in my code about loyalty, young man,’ he taunted me, his voice echoing in the space between us. ‘You played your role, but our

partnership is done.'

'You're a dead man, Roberts,' I roared back, only I couldn't quite manage a roar. My voice was weak, and anyway he'd left and I was too busy trying to tend to the flaming pain in my side and get myself to safety.

When I collected myself what I found was a branch sticking from my flank, the wound colouring my robes red. I yanked it out with a scream, tossed the stick away and clenched my teeth as I held the wound, feeling blood seep through my fingers. Roberts, you bastard. *You bastard*.

Somehow, despite the pain, I managed the climb back up the walls of the pit to the Observatory. I retraced my steps, through the bridge chamber and past the corpses at the entrance, limping back down to the beach, pain-sweat pouring off me. But as I stumbled out of the long grass and on to the beach what I saw filled me with anguish. The *Jackdaw*, my beloved *Jackdaw*, had left. There was just the *Rover* anchored offshore now.

And there, where the beach met the sea, was moored a yawl, the coxswain and rowers silent sentinels with the sea at their backs as they awaited their captain – Captain Bartholomew Roberts, who stood before me.

He crouched. His eyes flashed and he smiled that peculiar joyless smile of his. 'Oh … your *Jackdaw* has flown, Edward, eh? That's the beauty of a democracy … The many outvote the one. Aye, you could sail with me, but with a temper as hot as yours I fear you'd burn us all to cinders. Luckily I know the king's bounty on your head is a large one. And I intend to collect.'

The pain was too much. I could hold it together no more and felt myself passing out. The last thing I heard as the darkness claimed me was Bartholomew Roberts softly taunting me.

'Have you ever seen the inside of a Jamaican prison, boy? Have you?'

Part Four

57

November, 1720

A lot can happen in six months. But in the six months to November 1720 it happened to other people. Me, I was mouldering in jail in Kingston. While Bartholomew Roberts became the most feared pirate of the Caribbean, commanding a squadron of four vessels, his flagship the *Royal Fortune* at its head, I was trying and failing to sleep on a roll on the floor of a cell so cramped I couldn't lie straight. I was picking maggots from my food and holding my nose to get it down. I was drinking dirty water and praying it wouldn't kill me. I was watching the striped grey light from the bars of the door and listening to the clamour of the jail: the curses; night-time screams; a constant clanging that never ceased, as though someone, somewhere, spent all day and night rattling a cup along the bars; and, sometimes, I was listening to my own voice, just to remind myself that I was still alive, and I would curse my luck, curse Roberts, curse the Templars, curse my crew …

I had been betrayed – by Roberts, of course, though that was no surprise – but also by the *Jackdaw*. My time in jail gave me the distance I needed to see how my obsession with the Observatory had blinded me to the needs of my men, and I stopped blaming them for leaving me at Long Bay. I'd decided if I were lucky enough to see them again I'd greet them like brothers and tell them I bore no grudge and offer apologies of my own. Even so, the image of the *Jackdaw* sailing away without me burned like a brand on my brain.

Not for much longer. No doubt my trial approached – though I had yet to hear, of course. And after my trial would come my hanging.

Yesterday they had one. A pirate hanging, I mean. The trial was held in Spanish Town, and five of the men tried went to the gallows the day after at Gallows Point. They hanged the other six the next day in Kingston.

One of those they hanged yesterday was Captain John Rackham, the man we all knew as Calico Jack.

Poor old Jack. Not a good man but not an especially bad one either. And who can say fairer than that? I hoped he'd managed to get enough liquor down him

before they sent him to the gallows. Keep him warm for the journey to the other side.

Thing was, Calico Jack had a couple of lieutenants, and their trial was to start this very day. I was due to be brought up into the courtroom, in fact, where they said I might be needed as a witness, although they hadn't said whether for the defence of the prosecution.

The two lieutenants, you see, were Anne Bonny and Mary Read.

And therein lies a tale. I'd witnessed the story, beginning with what I'd seen at the Observatory: Calico Jack and Anne Bonny were lovers. Jack had worked his charm, tempted her away from James (that scurvy toad) and taken her to sea.

On board she'd dressed as a man. And she wasn't the only one. Mary Read was aboard ship, too, dressed as James Kidd, and the three of them, Calico Jack, Anne and Mary were all in on it. The two women wore men's jackets, long trousers and scarves round their necks. They carried pistols and cutlasses and were as fearsome as any man – and more dangerous, what with having more to prove.

And for a while they sailed the neighbourhood terrorizing merchant ships, until earlier in the year when they stopped off at New Providence. There on 22 August, the year of our Lord 1720, Rackham and a load of his crew, including Anne and Mary, stole a sloop called the *William* from Nassau harbour.

Of course Woodes Rogers knew exactly who was responsible. He issued a proclamation and despatched a sloop crammed with his own men to catch Calico Jack and his crew.

But old Calico Jack was on a roll, and in between splicing the main brace, which is to say carousing, he attacked fishing boats and merchant ships and a schooner.

Rogers didn't like that. He sent a second vessel after him.

But old Calico Jack didn't care, and he continued his piracy westward until the tip of Jamaica, where he encountered a privateer by the name of Captain Barnet, who saw the opportunity to make a bit of money in return for Jack's hide.

Sure enough Jack was boarded and his crew surrendered, all apart from Mary and Anne, that was. From what I heard Jack and his crew had caroused themselves stupid and were drunk or passed out when Barnet's men attacked. Like hellcats Mary and Anne cursed out the crew and fought with pistols and swords, but were overcome, and then the whole lot of them were taken across the island to Spanish Town jail.

And, like I say, they'd tried and hanged Jack already.

Now it was the turn of Anne and Mary.

I hadn’t seen many courtrooms in my life, thank God, but even so I’d never seen one as busy as this. My guards led me up a set of stone steps to a barred door, opened it, shoved me out into the gallery and bid me sit. I gave them a puzzled look. *What’s going on?* But they ignored me and stood with their backs to the wall, muskets at the ready in case I made a break for it.

But make a break where? My hands were manacled, men were wedged into the gallery seats all around: spectators, witnesses … all of them come to lay eyes on the two infamous women pirates, Anne Bonny and Mary Read.

They stood together before the judge, who glared at them and banged his gavel.

‘The charges, sir, I will hear them again,’ he called to the bailiff, who stood and cleared his throat.

‘His Majesty’s court contends that the defendants, Mary Read and Anne Bonny, did piratically, feloniously and in a hostile manner attack, engage and take seven certain fishing boats.’

During the minor uproar that followed I sensed somebody sit behind me. Two people, in fact – but paid them little mind.

‘Secondly,’ continued the bailiff, ‘this court contends that the defendants lurked upon the high seas and did set upon, shoot at and take two certain merchant sloops, thus putting the captains and their crews in corporeal fear of their lives.’

And then matters of court receded into the background as one of the men sitting behind me leaned forward and spoke.

‘Edward James Kenway …’ I recognized the voice of Woodes Rogers at once. ‘Born in Swansea to an English father and Welsh mother. Married at eighteen to Miss Caroline Scott, now estranged.’

I lifted my manacles and shifted round in the seat. Neither of my guards with their muskets had moved, but they watched us carefully. Beside Rogers, every inch the man of rank, sat Laureano Torres, dapper and composed in the balmy heat of the courtroom. They weren’t here on pirate-hunting business, though. They were here on Templar business.

‘She is a beautiful woman, I’m told,’ said Torres, with a nod of his head in greeting.

‘If you touch her, you bastards …’ I snarled.

Rogers leaned forward. I felt a nudge at my shirt and looked down to see the muzzle of his pistol in my side. In the time since my fall at the Observatory I had by some miracle avoided gangrene or infection, but the wound had never quite healed. He didn’t know about it, of course; he couldn’t have. But he’d still somehow managed to prod it with the barrel of his gun, making me wince.

‘If you know the Observatory’s location, tell us now and you’ll be out of here in a flash,’ said Rogers.

Of course. That was why I hadn’t felt the burn of the hangman’s noose up to now.

‘Rogers can hold these British hounds at bay for a time,’ said Torres, ‘but this will be your fate if you fail to cooperate.’ He was indicating the courtroom, where the judge was speaking, where witnesses were telling of the awful things Anne and Mary had done.

Their warning over, Torres and Rogers stood, just as a female witness described in breathless detail how she’d been attacked by the two women pirates. She’d known they were women, she said, ‘by the largeness of their breasts’. The court laughed at that until the laughter was silenced by the rap of the judge’s gavel, the sound drowning out the slam of the door behind Rogers and Torres.

Anne and Mary, meanwhile, hadn’t said a word. *What’s the matter? Cat got your tongue?* I’d never known them lost for words before, but here they were, silent as the grave. Tales of their derring-do were told, and they never once butted in to correct anything egregious, nor even said a peep when the court found them guilty. Even when they were asked if they could offer any reason why sentence of death should not be passed. Nothing.

So the judge, not knowing the two ladies, and perhaps taking them for the reticent sort, delivered his sentence: death by hanging.

And then – and only then – did they open their mouths.

‘Milord, we plead our bellies,’ said Mary Read, breaking their silence.

‘*What?*’ said the judge, paling.

‘We are pregnant,’ said Anne Bonny.

There was uproar.

I wondered if both the sprogs belonged to Calico Jack, the old devil.

‘You can’t hang a woman quick with child, can ye?’ called Anne over the noise.

The courtroom was in turmoil. As if anticipating my thoughts one of the guards behind nudged me with his musket barrel. *Don’t even think about it.*

‘Quiet! Quiet!’ called the judge. ‘If what you claim is true then your executions will be stayed, but only until your terms are up.’

‘Then I’ll be up the duff the next time you come knocking!’ roared Anne.

That was the Anne I remembered, with the face of an angel and the mouth of the roughest jack tar. And she had the court in uproar again as the red-faced judge hammered at the bench with his gavel and ordered them removed, and the session broke up in disarray.

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‘Edward Kenway. Do you remember you once threatened to cut off my lips and feed them to me?’

Laureano Torres’s face appeared from the gloom outside my prison cell door, framed by the window, divided by the bars.

‘I didn’t do it, though,’ I reminded him, my disused voice croaking.

‘But you would have done.’

True. ‘But I didn’t.’

He smiled. ‘The typical terror tactics of a pirate: unsophisticated and unsubtle. What say you, Rogers?’

He lingered there, too. Woodes Rogers, the great pirate hunter. Hanging about near my cell door.

‘Is that why you’ve been denying me food and water?’ I rasped.

‘Oh,’ chuckled Torres, ‘but there is much, much more to come. We have the little matter of the Observatory’s location to extract. We have the little matter of what you did to Hornigold. Come, let us show you what lies in store. *Guards*.’

Two men arrived, the same pair of Templar stooges who’d escorted me to the courtroom. Torres and Rogers left as I was manacled and leg irons were fitted. And then with my boots dragging on the flagstones they hauled me out of the cell and along the passageway, out into the prison courtyard where I blinked in the blinding sun, breathed fresh air for the first time in weeks and then, to my surprise, out of the main prison gates.

‘Where are you taking me?’ I gasped. The light of the sun was too blinding. I couldn’t open my eyes. They felt as though they were glued together.

There was no reply. I could hear the sounds of Kingston. Daily life carrying on as normal around me.

‘How much are they paying you?’ I tried to say. ‘Whatever it is, let me go and I’ll double it.’

They came to a halt.

‘Good man, good man,’ I mumbled. ‘I can make you rich. Just get me –’

A fist smashed into my face, splitting my lip, breaking something in my nose that began to gush blood. I coughed and groaned. As my head lolled back a face

came close to mine.

‘*Shut. Up.*’

I blinked, trying to focus on him, trying to remember his face.

‘I’ll get you for that,’ I murmured. Blood or saliva ran from my mouth. ‘You mark my words, mate.’

‘Shut up, or next time it’ll be the point of my sword.’

I chuckled. ‘You’re full of shit, mate. Your master wants me alive. Kill me and you’ll be taking my place in that cell. Or worse.’

Through a veil of pain, blood and piercing sunlight I saw his expression darken. ‘We’ll see about that,’ he snarled. ‘We’ll see about that.’

And then the journey continued, me spitting blood, trying to clear my head and mostly failing until we came to what looked like the foot of a ladder. I heard the murmured voices of Torres and Rogers, and then a creaking sound coming from just overhead, and when I raised my chin and cast my eyes upwards what I saw was a gibbet. One of the stooges had climbed the ladder and unlocked it, and the door opened with a complaint of rusty metal. I felt the sun beat down upon me.

I tried to say something, to explain that I was parched and could die in the sun. And that if I did that – if I died – then they’d never find out where the Observatory was. Only Black Bart would know, and what a terrifying thought that was – Black Bart in charge of all that power.

He’s doing that right now, isn’t he? That’s how he got to be so successful.

But I never got the chance to say it, because they’d locked me in the gibbet. Locked me in the gibbet to let the sun do its work. Let it slowly cook me alive.

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At sundown my two friends came to fetch me and take me back to my cell. My reward for surviving was water, a bowl of it on my cell floor, just enough to dab on my lips, keep me alive, to use on the blisters and pustules brought up by the sun.

Rogers and Torres came. ‘Where is it? Where is the Observatory?’

With cracked, desiccated lips I smiled at them but said nothing.

He’s robbing you blind, isn’t he? Roberts, I mean. He’s destroying all your plans.

‘You want to go back there tomorrow?’

‘Sure,’ I whispered. ‘Sure. I could do with the fresh air.’

It wasn’t every day. Some days I stayed in my cell. Some days they only hung me for a few hours.

‘Where is it? Where is the Observatory?’

Some days they left me until well after nightfall. But it wasn’t so bad when the sun went in. I was still crumpled into the gibbet like a man stuck in a privy, every muscle and bone shrieking in agony; I was still dying of thirst and hunger, my sunburnt flesh flaming. But still, it wasn’t so bad. At least the sun had gone in.

‘Where is it? Where is the Observatory?’

Every day I’m up there he’s a bigger pain in the arse, isn’t he? Every day wasted is Black Bart’s triumph over the Templars. There’s that at least.

‘You want to go back there tomorrow?’

‘Sure.’

I wasn’t sure I could take another day. In a strange way I was trusting them not to kill me. I was trusting in *my* resolve being greater than theirs. I was trusting in my own inner strength.

But for another day I hung there, crouched and crumpled in the gibbet. And when night fell again I heard the guards taunting me, and I heard them gloating about Calico Jack, and how Charles Vane had been arrested.

Charles Vane, I thought. *Charles Vane … I remember him. He tried to kill me. Or did I try to kill him?*

And then the sounds of a short pitched battle, bodies falling, muffled groans.

And then a voice.

‘Good morning, Captain Kenway. I have a gift for you.’

Very, very slowly, I opened my eyes. On the ground below me, painted grey in the dead light of the day, were two bodies. My friends, the Templar stooges. Both had slashed throats. A pair of crimson smiles adorned their necks.

And crouching by them, rifling through their tunics for the gibbet keys, was the Assassin Ah Tabai.

I assumed I’d never see him again. After all, the Assassin Ah Tabai was not the greatest supporter of Edward Kenway. He probably would just as soon have slit *my* throat as rescue me from jail.

Fortunately for me, he chose to rescue me from jail.

But – ‘Do not mistake my purpose here,’ he said, climbing the ladder, finding the right key for the lock and being good enough to catch me when I almost fell forward from the gibbet. He had a bulging leather flask and held the teat to my lips. As I gulped I felt tears of relief and gratitude pouring down my cheeks.

‘I have come for Anne and Mary,’ he was saying as he helped me down the ladder. ‘You owe me nothing for this. But if you would lend me your aid I can promise you safe passage from this place.’

I had collapsed to the ground, where Ah Tabai allowed me to gather myself, handing me the leather flask once again.

‘I’ll need weapons,’ I said after some minutes.

He smiled and handed me a hidden blade. It was no small thing for an Assassin to hand an interloper a blade. And as I crouched on the ground and strapped it on I realized I was being honoured in some way. The thought gave me strength.

I stood and engaged the steel, worked the action of the blade then slid it home. It was time – time to go and save Anne and Mary.

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He had some distractions to set off, he said. So I was to look for the women while he saw to that. Fine. I knew where they were being held, and not long later, when the first of his explosions gave me just the distraction I needed, I was able to slip back into the prison compound and make my way there.

Then, as I drew closer, what I heard was screaming and the unmistakable voice of Anne Bonny. ‘Help her, for God’s sake. Fetch help. Mary’s ill. Somebody, please.’

In return I heard the sound of soldiers trying to shut her up, thumping at the bars of her cell with their musket butts.

Not to be silenced, Anne was shrieking at them now. ‘She’s ill. Please, she’s ill,’ Anne was screaming. ‘She’s dying.’

‘A dying pirate, there’s your difference,’ one of the men was saying.

I ran now, heart thumping, feeling the pain at my side but ignoring it as I turned a corner in the corridor of the cellblock, one hand on the cool stone wall to steady my progress and the other engaging the blade at the same time.

The guards were already rattled by Ah Tabai’s explosions and Anne’s screaming. The first one turned and raised his musket but I swept my blade under and up, thrusting it through his ribcage, gripping the back of his head and wrenching it into his heart at the same time. His mate had turned at the sound of the body thumping to the stone and his eyes widened. He reached for his pistol but I got to him before his fingers curled round the grip, and with a shout leapt and struck downwards, plunging the blade into him, too.

Stupid move. I wasn’t in the condition for that kind of action.

Immediately I felt a searing pain along my side. Pain like fire that began at the wound and then rolled up and down my body. In a tumble of flailing arms and legs I fell with my blade embedded in the guard, landing badly but pulling it free as I rolled to meet the attack of the last guard …

Thank God. Ah Tabai appeared from my right, his own blade engaged, and seconds later the last guard lay dead on the stone.

I gave him grateful eyes and we turned our attention to the cells – to the screaming.

There were two cells beside one another. Anne stood, her desperate face pressed between the bars. ‘Mary,’ she was pleading, ‘see to Mary.’

I didn’t need telling twice. From a guard’s belt I liberated the keys and tore open Mary’s door. Inside she was using her hands for a pillow on the low, dirty cot where she lay. Her chest rose and fell weakly, and though her eyes were open she stared at the wall without seeing it.

‘Mary,’ I said, bending to her and speaking quietly. ‘It’s me. Edward.’

She breathed steady but ragged breaths. Her eyes stayed where they were, blinking but not moving, not focusing. She wore a dress but it was cold in the cell and there was no blanket to cover her. No water to touch to her parched lips. Her forehead was shiny with sweat and cauldron-hot when I put a hand to it.

‘Where’s the child?’ I asked.

‘They took it,’ replied Anne from the door. *The bastards.* My fists clenched.

‘No idea where she is,’ continued Anne, then suddenly cried out in pain herself.

Jesus. That’s all we need.

Right, let’s go.

As gently as I could I pulled Mary to a sitting position then swung her arm round my shoulder and stood. My own wound grumbled, but Mary cried out in pain and I could only imagine the agony she was going through. After childbirth she needed rest. Her body needed time to recover.

‘Lean on me, Mary,’ I told her. ‘Come on.’

From somewhere came the shouts of approaching soldiers. Ah Tabai’s distractions had worked; they’d given us the time we needed, but now the troops had recovered.

‘Search every cell,’ I heard.

We began stumbling along the passageway back towards the courtyard, Ah Tabai and Anne forging ahead.

But Mary was heavy and I was weak from days and nights spent hung in the gibbet, and the wound in my side – *Christ, it hurt* – something must have torn down there because the pain flared, and I felt blood, warm and wet, course into the waistband of my breeches.

‘Please, help me, Mary,’ I begged her, but I could feel her body sag as if the fight was leaving her, the fever too much for it.

‘Stop. Please,’ she was saying. Her breathing was even more erratic. Her head lolled from side to side. Her knees seemed to have given way and she sank to the flagstones of the passageway. Up ahead Ah Tabai was helping Anne, whose hands clutched at her stomach, and they turned to urge us on, hearing more shouting from behind us, more soldiers arriving.

‘There’s no one here!’ came the shout. So now they had discovered the breakout. More running feet.

Ah Tabai and Anne reached the door to the courtyard. A black square became a grey one and night air rushed into the passageway.

Guards behind us. Ahead Ah Tabai and Anne were already across the courtyard and at the main gate where the Assassin surprised a guard who slid down the wall dying. Anne was screaming now and needing help as they clambered through the wicket door of the prison compound and out into a night glowing orange with the fire of Ah Tabai’s explosions.

But Mary couldn’t walk. Not any more. I grimaced as I bent down and scooped her up, feeling another tearing sensation in my side as though my wound, though a year old, simply couldn’t cope with the extra weight.

‘Mary …’

I could carry her no longer, and had to lay her down on the stones of the courtyard. From all around us I could hear the sound of tramping boots and soldiers calling to one another.

Fine, I thought. *Let them come. Here is where I’ll stand and fight. It’s as good a place to die as any.*

She looked up at me and her eyes focused, and she managed to smile before a fresh surge of pain made its way through her body. ‘Don’t die on my account,’ she managed. ‘Go.’

I tried to say no.

But she was right.

I laid her down, and tried to make her as comfortable as possible on the stones. My eyes were wet when I spoke. ‘Dammit. You should have been the one to outlast me.’

She smiled a ghostly smile. ‘I’ve done my part. Will you?’

Her image divided as though viewed through diamonds and I palmed tears from my eyes. ‘If you came with me I could,’ I urged her.

She said nothing.

No, please. Don’t go. Not you.

‘Mary … ?’

She was trying to say something. I put my ear to her lips. ‘I’ll be with you, Kenway,’ she whispered. Her final breath was warm on my ear. ‘I will.’

I stood up and looked down at Mary Read, knowing there would be time to mourn her later, when I would remember a remarkable person, perhaps the most remarkable I ever knew. But for the moment I thought of how the British soldiers had let this good woman give birth, ripped her baby from her, then left her

wounded and feverish in a prison cell. No blanket to cover her. No water to touch to her lips.

I heard the first British soldiers coming into the courtyard behind me. *Just in time to exact a little revenge before I make my escape.*

I engaged the blade and span to meet them.

61

I guess you could say I did a bit of drinking after that. And I saw people in my delirium, figures from the past: Caroline, Woodes Rogers, Bartholomew Roberts.

And ghosts, too: Calico Jack, Charles Vane, Benjamin Hornigold, Edward Thatch.

And Mary Read.

Eventually, after a binge that lasted how long, I couldn't say, salvation came in the form of Adewalé. He came to me on the beach in Kingston, and I thought he was another ghost at first, another figure from my visions. Come to taunt me. Come to remind me of my failings.

'Captain Kenway, you look like a bowl of plum duff.'

One of my visions. A ghost. A trick my poor hungover mind is playing on me. And, yes, while we're on the subject, where is my bottle of liquor?

Until, when he reached a hand to me and I reached back, expecting his fingers to become wisps of smoke, to disappear into nothing, they were real. Hard as wood, just as reliable. And *real*.

I sat up. 'Christ, I've got a head for ten …'

Adewalé pulled me up. 'On your feet.'

I stood rubbing my poor throbbing head. 'You put me in a spot, Adewalé. After you left me with Roberts I should have hard feelings about seeing you here.' I looked at him. 'But mostly, I'm bloody glad.'

'Me too, breddah, and you'll be chuffed to know your *Jackdaw* is still in one piece.'

He took me by the shoulder and pointed out to sea, and maybe it was the drink making me feel extra emotional but tears filled my eyes to see the *Jackdaw* once again. The men stood at the gunwales and I saw them in the rigging and their faces at the hatches of the stern guns, every man-jack of them looking over to the beach, to where Adewalé stood with me now. *They came*, I thought, and a tear rolled down my cheek that I brushed away with the sleeve of my robes (a parting gift from Ah Tabai, though I'd done little to honour them since).

'Shall we set sail?' I asked him, but Adewalé was already walking away, further up the beach towards inland. 'You're leaving?' I called after him.

‘Aye, Edward. For I have another calling elsewhere.’

‘But …’

‘When your heart and your head are ready, visit the Assassins. I think you will understand then.’

So I took his advice. I sailed the *Jackdaw* to Tulum, back to where I had first discovered my sense and met Ah Tabai. There, I left the crew on board and went in search of Ah Tabai, only to arrive in the aftermath of an attack, walking into the smouldering, smoking ruins of an Assassin village and finding Adewalé there, too. This, then, was his calling.

‘Jesus, Adewalé, what the hell happened here?’

‘*You* happened here, Edward. The damage you caused six years ago has not been undone.’

I winced. So that was it. The Assassins were still feeling the repercussions of those maps I had sold to the Templars.

I looked at him. ‘I’m not an easy man to call a friend, am I? Is that why you’re here?’

‘To fight beside a man so driven by personal gain and glory is a hard thing, Edward. And I have come to feel the Assassins – and their creed – is a more honourable course.’

So that was it. The words of Mary Read and Ah Tabai had been wasted on me but Adewalé had been heeding them. I wished I’d made more effort to do the same.

‘Have I been unfair?’ he prompted.

I shook my head. ‘For years I’ve been rushing around, taking whatever I fancied, not giving a tinker’s cuss for those I hurt. Yet here I am … with riches and reputation, feeling no wiser than when I left home. Yet when I turn round, look at the course I’ve run … there’s not a man or woman I love left standing beside me.’

A new voice spoke up. Ah Tabai. ‘There is time to make amends, Captain Kenway.’

I looked at him. ‘Mary … Before she died she asked me to do good by her. To sort out the mess I’d made. Can you help me?’

Ah Tabai nodded. He and Adewalé turned towards the village and I walked alongside them.

‘Mary was fond of you, Edward,’ noted Ah Tabai, ‘she saw something in your bearing that gave her hope you might one day fight with us.’ He paused. ‘What do you think of our creed?’ he said.

We both knew that six years ago – Jesus, *one* year ago – I would have scoffed and called it silly. Now, though, my answer was different.

'It's hard to say. For if nothing is true, then why believe anything? And if everything is permitted … Why not chase every desire?'

'Why indeed?' smiled Ah Tabai mysteriously.

My thoughts collided in my head; my brain sang with new possibilities.

'It might be that this idea is only the beginning of wisdom, and not its final form,' I said.

'That's quite a step up from the Edward I met many years ago,' said Ah Tabai, nodding with satisfaction. 'Edward, you are welcome here.'

Thanking him, I asked, 'How's Anne's child?'

He shook his head and lowered his eyes, a gesture that said it all. 'She's a strong woman, but not invincible.'

I pictured her on the deck of the *William*, cursing her crewmates as cowards. It was said she'd fired shots at the men as they cowered drunk below decks. I could well believe it. I could well imagine how terrible and magnificent she'd been that day.

I went to where she sat and joined her, staring over the treetops and out to sea. She hugged her own legs and turned her pale face to me with a smile.

'Edward,' she said in greeting.

'I'm sorry for your loss,' I said.

I knew a thing or two about loss. Learning more every day.

'If I'd stayed in prison they'd have taken him from me –' she sighed as she turned her face into the breeze – 'and he'd now be alive. Might be this is God's way of saying I ain't fit to be a mum, carrying on like I do. Cursing and drinking, and fighting.'

'You are a fighter, aye. In prison, I heard stories of the infamous Anne Bonny and Mary Read, taking on the king's navy together. Just the pair of you.'

She gave a laugh that was partly a sigh. 'It's all true. And we would have won that day if Jack and his lads weren't passed out in the hold from drink. Ah … Edward … Everyone's gone now, ain't they? Mary. Rackham. Thatch. And all the rest. I miss the lot, rough as they were. Do you feel that, too? All empty inside like?'

'I do,' I said. 'Devil curse me, I do.'

I remembered a time when Mary had put her hand on my knee, and I did the same to Anne now. She looked at it there for a moment, knowing it was as much an invitation as a gesture of comfort. And then she put her own hand to mine, rested her head on my chest, and we stayed like that for a while.

Neither of us said anything. There was no need to.

62

April, 1721

Now was the time to start putting things right. It was time to tie up loose ends, to take care of business; it was time to begin wreaking my revenge: Rogers, Torres, Roberts. They all had to die.

I stood on the deck of the *Jackdaw* with Adewalé and Ah Tabai. ‘I know my targets by sight well enough. But how will I find them?’

‘We have spies and informants in every city,’ said Ah Tabai. ‘Visit our bureaus, and the Assassins there will guide you.’

‘That fixes Torres and Rogers,’ I told him, ‘but Bartholomew Roberts won’t be near any city. Might take months to find him.’

‘Or years,’ agreed Ah Tabai, but you are a man of talent and quality, Captain Kenway. I believe you will find him.’

Adewalé looked at me. ‘And if you are at a loss do not be afraid to lean on your quartermaster for aid,’ he smiled.

I nodded my thanks then went on to the poop deck, leaving Ah Tabai and Adewalé to descend a Jacob’s ladder to a rowing boat bobbling by our hull.

‘Quartermaster,’ I said, ‘what’s our present course?’

She turned. Resplendent in her pirate outfit.

‘Due east, captain, if it’s still Kingston we’re sailing for?’

‘It is, Miss Bonny, it is. Call it out.’

‘Weigh anchor and let fall the courses, lads!’ she called, and she shone with happiness. ‘We’re sailing for Jamaica!’

Torres, then. At the bureau in Kingston I was told of his whereabouts; that he would be attending a political function in town that very night. After that his movements were uncertain; it needed to be tonight whether I liked it or not.

So – how? I decided to take on the guise of a visiting diplomat, Ruggiero Ferraro, and before I left took a letter from within my robes and handed it to the bureau chief – a letter for *Caroline Scott Kenway of Hawkins Lane, Bristol*. In it

I asked after her: *Are you safe? Are you well?* A letter full of hope but burdened with worry.

Later that night I found the man I was looking for, Ruggiero Ferraro. In short order I killed him, took his clothes and joined the others as we made our way to the party, and there were welcomed inside.

Being there took me back to when I'd posed as Duncan Walpole, when I'd first visited Torres's mansion. That feeling of being overawed, out of place and possibly even out of my depth, but chasing some notion of fortune, looking for the quickest way to make easy money.

Now I was once again looking for something. I was looking for Woodes Rogers. But riches were no longer my primary concern. I was an Assassin now.

'You are Mr Ferraro, I take it?' said a pretty female guest. 'I do *adore* your frippery. Such elegance and colour.'

Thank you, madam, thank you. I gave her a deep bow in what I hoped was the Italian manner. Pretty she may have been, but I had enough ladies in my life for the time being. Caroline waiting at home, not to mention certain … *feelings* for Anne.

And then, just as I realized that *grazie* was the only Italian word I knew, Woodes Rogers was giving a speech.

'Ladies and gentlemen, a toast to my brief tenure as governor of the Bahamas! For, under my watch, no less than three hundred avowed pirates took the king's pardon and swore fealty to the Crown.'

His face twisted into a bitter, sarcastic sneer.

'And yet, for all my successes, His Majesty has seen fit to *sack* me and call me home to England. *Brilliant!*'

It was a bad-tempered, resentful end to the speech, and sure enough his guests didn't quite know what to make of it. During his time on Nassau he'd handed out religious leaflets trying to persuade the merry buccaneers of New Providence to mend their hard-drinking, whoring ways, so perhaps he wasn't accustomed to the liquor and he seemed to wobble around his own party, ranting at anyone unfortunate enough to find themselves in the vicinity.

'Hurray, hurray for the ignoble and ignorant prigs, who rule the world with sticks up their arses. Hurray!'

Moving on and another guest winced as he let fly with his whinges. 'I brought those brutes in Nassau to heal, by God. And this is the thanks I get. *Unbelievable*.'

I followed him around the room, staying out of his eye line, trading greetings with the guests. I must have bowed a hundred times, murmured *grazie* a hundred times. Until at last Rogers appeared to have exhausted the goodwill of his

friends, for as he made another circle of the hall he found more and more backs were turned. The next moment he swayed, marooned in the room, looking around himself, only to find his erstwhile friends engaged in more thrilling conversations. For a second I saw the Woodes Rogers of old as he composed himself, drew back his shoulders, raised his chin and decided to take a little air. I knew where he was going, probably before he did, so it was an easy matter to move out to the balcony ahead of him, and wait for him there. And then, when he arrived, to bury my blade into his shoulder and, with one hand over his mouth to stop him screaming, lower him to the floor of the balcony and sit him up against the balustrade.

It all happened too quickly for him. Too quickly to fight back. Too quickly to even be surprised, and he tried to focus on me with drunken, pained eyes.

'You were a privateer once,' I said to him. 'How is it you lack so much respect for sailors only trying to make their way in this world?'

He looked at where my blade was still embedded in his shoulder and neck. It was all that kept him alive, because as soon as I removed it his artery would be open, the balcony would be awash with his blood and he would be dead within a minute.

'You couldn't possibly understand my motives,' he said with a sardonic smile. 'You who spent a whole lifetime dismantling everything that makes our civilization shine.'

'But I do understand,' I insisted. 'I've seen the Observatory, and I know its power. You'd use that device to spy. You Templars would use that device to spy and blackmail and sabotage.'

He nodded, but the movement pained him, blood soaked his shirt and jacket. 'Yes, and yet all for a greater purpose. To ensure justice. To snuff out the lies and to seek truth.'

'There's no man on earth who needs that power.'

'Yet you suffer the outlaw Roberts to use it …'

I shook my head to put him right about that. 'No. I'm taking it back. And if you tell me where he is, I'll stop Roberts.'

Africa, he said. And I pulled my blade free.

Blood flowed heavily from his neck and his body sagged against the balustrade, undignified in death. What a difference to the man I'd first met all those years ago at Torres's mansion: an ambitious man with a handshake as firm as his resolve. And now his life ended not just at my blade but in a drunken fugue, a morass of bitterness and shattered dreams. Though he'd ousted the pirates from Nassau, he hadn't been given the support he needed to finish the

job. The British had turned their backs on him. His hopes of rebuilding Nassau had been shattered.

Blood puddled on the stone around me and I moved my feet to avoid it. His chest rose and fell slowly. His eyes were half closed and his breathing became irregular as life slipped away.

Then from behind came a scream and, startled, I turned to see a woman, the finery of her clothes in stark contrast to her demeanour, a hand over her mouth and wide, terrified eyes. There was the rumble of running feet, more figures appearing on the balcony. Nobody daring to tackle me but not withdrawing either. Just watching.

I cursed, stood and vaulted to the balustrade. To my left the balcony filled with guests.

'*Grazie*,' I told them, then spread my arms and jumped.

63

February, 1722

And so to Africa, where Black Bart – now the most feared and infamous pirate in the Caribbean – continued to evade the British. I knew how he did it, of course, because in his possession was the Observatory skull, and he was using it – using it to anticipate every move against him.

As I set the *Jackdaw* in pursuit of him Roberts was stealing French ships and sailing them down the coast to Sierra Leone. His *Royal Fortune* remained at the head of his fleet and he continued sailing south-east along the African coast: raiding, pillaging, plundering as he went, constantly making improvements to his vessels and becoming better armed, more powerful and even more fearsome than he already was.

We had come across the sickening evidence of his campaign of terror in January, when we had sailed into the aftermath of not a battle but a massacre: Roberts in the *Royal Fortune* had attacked twelve ships at anchor in Whydah. All had surrendered apart from an English slave ship, the *Porcupine*, and their refusal to lay down arms had made Roberts so furious that he had ordered the ship boarded then set alight.

His men had flooded the decks with tar and set flame to the *Porcupine* with the slaves still on board, chained in pairs below decks. Those who jumped overboard to escape the blaze were torn limb from limb by sharks, the rest burned alive or drowned. A horrible, horrible death.

By the time we arrived the sea was awash with debris. Vile black smoke shrouded the entire neighbourhood, and smouldering in the ocean, almost up to the waterline, was the burnt-out hull of the *Porcupine*.

Disgusted by what we'd seen, we followed Roberts's trail south and then to Principé, where he'd anchored his ship in the bay and taken a party of men ashore to make camp and gather supplies.

We waited. Then as night fell I gave the *Jackdaw* orders to wait an hour before attacking the *Royal Fortune.* Next I took a rowing boat to shore, pulled up the cowl of my robes and followed a path inland, led by the shouts and singing I

could hear in the distance. And then, as I grew closer, I smelled the tang of the campfire. As I crouched nearby I could see its soft glow divided by the undergrowth.

I was in no mood to take prisoners, so I used grenadoes. Just as their captain was famous for saying he gave no quarter, neither did I, and as the camp erupted into explosions and screams and a choking cloud of thick black smoke I strode to its centre with my blade and a pistol at the ready.

The battle was short because I was ruthless. It didn't matter that some were asleep, some naked and most of them unarmed. Perhaps the men who poured tar on the decks of the *Porcupine* were among those who died at the point of my blade. I hoped so.

Roberts did not stand and fight. He grabbed a torch and ran. Behind us were the screams of my massacre at camp, but I left his crew to their dying as I gave chase, following him up a pathway to a guard tower on a promontory.

'Why, who chases me now?' he called. 'Is it a spectre come to spook me? Or the gaunt remains of a man I sent to hell, now crawling back to pester me?'

'No, Black Bart Roberts,' I shouted back. 'It's I, Edward Kenway, come to call a halt to your reign of terror!'

He raced into the guard tower and climbed. I followed, emerging back into the night at the top to see Roberts standing at the edge of the tower, a precipice behind him. I stopped. If he jumped I lost the skull. I couldn't afford to let him jump.

His arm holding the torch waved. He was signalling – but to whom?

'I'll not fight where you have the advantage, lad,' he said, breathing heavily.

He laid down the torch.

He was going to jump.

I started forward to try to catch him but he'd gone, and I scrambled to the edge on my belly and looked over, only now seeing what had been hidden from me; what Black Bart knew to be there, why he'd been signalling.

It was the *Royal Fortune*, and in the glow of her lamps I saw Roberts had landed on deck and was already dusting himself off and peering up the rock face to where I lay. Around him were his men, and in the next instant I was pulling back from the lip as muskets began popping and balls began smacking into the stone around me.

And then, not far away, I saw the *Jackdaw*. Right on time. Good lads. I picked up the torch and began signalling to them, and soon they were close enough for me to see Anne at the tiller, her hair blowing in the wind as she brought the *Jackdaw* to bear by the cliff face, close enough for me to …

Jump.

And the chase was on.

We pursued him through the narrow rock passages of the coastline, firing our carriage guns when we were able. In return his men lobbed mortar shot at us and mine returned with musket fire and grenadoes whenever we were within range.

Then – '*Sail ho!*' – came the British naval warship, the HMS *Swallow*, and with a lurch of horror I realized she was after Roberts, too. This heavily armed, determined warship was no doubt as sickened by the stories of his exploits as we had been.

Leave them to it? No. I couldn't allow them to sink the *Fortune*. Roberts had the Observatory skull with him. I couldn't risk it sinking to the seabed, never to be seen again.

'There is a device within that needs taking,' I told Anne. 'I have to board her myself.'

Carriage guns boomed, the three ships locked in combat now, the *Jackdaw* and *Swallow* with a common enemy but not allies. We came under fire from all sides, and as British shot peppered our gunwales and shook our shrouds, I gave Anne the order to make haste away.

Me, I was going for a swim.

It isn't easy to swim from one ship to another, especially if both are involved in battle. But then most are not gifted with my determination. I had the cover of the half-light on my side, not to mention the fact that the crew of the *Fortune* already had enough to contend with. When I climbed aboard I found a ship in disarray. A ship I was able to pass through virtually undetected.

I took my fair share of scalps along the way, and I'd cut the throat of the first mate and killed the quartermaster before I found Black Bart, who turned to face me with his sword drawn. I noted, almost with amusement, that he had changed his clothes. He had put on his best bib and tucker to meet the English: a crimson waistcoat and breeches, a hat with a red feather, a pair of pistols on silk slings over his shoulders. What hadn't changed were those eyes of his. Those dark eyes that were surely a reflection of the blackened, corroded soul inside.

We fought, but it was not a fight of any distinction. Black Bart Roberts was a cruel man, a cunning man, a wise man, if wisdom can exist in a man so devoid of humanity. But he was not a swordsman.

'By Jove,' he called as we fought. 'Edward Kenway. How can I not be impressed by the attention you've paid me?'

I refused him the courtesy of a reply. I fought on relentlessly, confident not in my skill – for that would have been the arrogant Edward Kenway of old – but in a belief that I would emerge the victor. Which I did. And at last he fell to the deck with my blade embedded in him, pulling me into a crouch.

He smiled, his fingers going to where the blade was stuck in his chest. ‘A merry life and a short one, as promised,’ he said. ‘How well I know myself.’ He smirked a little. His eyes bored into me. ‘And what of you, Edward? Have you found the peace you seek?’

‘I’m not aiming so high as that,’ I told him, ‘for what is peace but a confusion between two wars?’

He looked surprised for a second, as though thinking me incapable of anything other than grunts and demands for gold or another tankard. How pleasing it was that in his final moments Bartholomew Roberts witnessed the change in me, knew that his death at my hands was not driven by greed but by something nobler.

‘You’re a stoic then,’ he laughed. ‘Perhaps I was wrong about you. She might have had some use for you after all.’

‘She?’ I said, puzzled. ‘Of whom do you speak?’

‘Oh … She who lies in wait. Entombed. I had hoped to find her, to see her again. To open the door of the temple and hear her speak my name once more. Aita …’

Mumbo-jumbo. More bloody mumbo-jumbo.

‘Talk sense, man.’

‘I was born too soon, like so many others before.’

‘Where’s the device, Roberts?’ I asked him, tired now – tired of his riddles, even at the end.

From his clothes he pulled the skull and offered it to me with fingers that shook.

‘Destroy this body, Edward,’ he said as I took it and the last of life seeped from him. ‘The Templars … If they take me …’

And he died. And it was not for him, nor for the peace of his soul, that I tossed his body overboard, consigning it to the depths. But so that the Templars would not have him. Whoever – *whatever* – this Sage had been, the safest place for his body was at the bottom of the sea.

And now, Grand Master Torres, I’m coming for you.

64

Arriving in Havana a few days before, I'd I found the city in a state of high alert. Torres, it appeared, had been warned of my imminent arrival and was taking no chances: soldiers patrolled the streets, citizens were being searched and forced to reveal their faces, and Torres himself had gone into hiding – accompanied, of course, by his trusty bodyguard El Tiburón.

I'd used the Observatory skull. Under the watchful eye of the Assassin bureau chief, Rhona Dinsmore, I took a vial of Torres's blood in one hand and the skull in the other. As she watched me work I wondered how I might look to her. Like a madman? A magician? A man using ancient science?

'Through the blood of the governor, we can see through his eyes,' I told her.

She looked as intrigued as she did doubtful. And after all, I wasn't sure of it myself. I'd seen it work in the Observatory, but in images conjured up in the chamber by Roberts. Here I was trying something new.

I needn't have worried. The red of the blood in the vial seemed to bathe the inside of the skull and its eyeholes burned scarlet as it began to glow and display images on its polished dome. We were looking through the eyes of Governor Laureano Torres, who was looking at –

'That's … That's by the church,' she said, amazed.

Moments later I'd been in pursuit, and followed Torres as far as his fort, where the trap had been sprung. At some point a decoy had taken Torres's place. It was he who fell beneath my blade, and there, waiting for me beneath the walls of the fort, implacable, silent as ever, was El Tiburón.

You should have killed me when you had the chance, I thought. Because when on the last occasion he'd bested me it was a different Edward Kenway he'd met in battle; things had changed in the meantime – *I* had changed – and I had much to prove to him …

So if he'd hoped to beat me as easily as he had before he was disappointed. He came forward, feinting, then switching sides, but I anticipated the move, defended easily, hit him on the counter and opened a nick on his cheek.

There was no grunt of pain, not from El Tiburón. But in those cloudy eyes was just the merest hint, the tiniest glimmer, of something I hadn't seen the last time we'd fought. Fear.

And that gave me a boost more than any shot of liquor, and once again I came forward with my blade flashing. He was forced on to the back foot, defending left and right, trying to find a weak spot in my attack but failing. *Where were his guards?* He hadn't summoned them, believing this would be an easy kill.

But how wrong he was, I thought as I pressed forward, dodged to my left and swiped backhanded with my blade, opening a gash in his tunic and a deep cut in his stomach that began gushing blood.

It slowed him down. It weakened him. I allowed him to come forward, pleased to see his sword strokes becoming more wild and haphazard as I carried on harrying him. Small but bloody strikes. Wearing him down.

He was slow now, his pain making him careless. Again I was able to drive forward with my cutlass, slash upwards with my hidden blade and twist it in his stomach. A mortal blow, surely?

His clothes were ragged and blood-stained. Blood from his stomach wound splattered to the ground, and he staggered with pain and exhaustion, looking at me mutely, but with all the agony of defeat in his eyes.

Until at last I put him down and he lay losing precious lifeblood, slowly dying in the heartless Havana sun. I crouched, blade to his throat, ready to plunge it up beneath his chin into his brain. End it quickly.

'You humbled me once, and I took that hard lesson and I bettered myself …' I told him. 'Die knowing that for all our conflicts, you helped make a soldier out of a scoundrel.'

My blade made a moist squelching sound as I finished it.

'Leave this life for a lasting peace, down among the dead,' I told his corpse, and left.

65

Desperate Torres had fled. With a last throw of the dice he'd decided to seek out the Observatory for himself.

I took the *Jackdaw* in pursuit, my heart sinking as with each passing hour there was no sighting of Torres, and with each passing hour we grew closer to Tulum. Would he find it? Did he already know where it was? Had he found another poor soul to torture? An Assassin?

And then we came round the coast of Tulum, and there was Torres's galleon at anchor, smaller consorts bobbling by her sides. We saw the glint of spyglasses and I ordered hard port. Moments later black squares appeared in the hull of the Spanish galleon and the sun shone dully off her gun barrels before there was a thud and a puff of fire and smoke and balls were smacking into us and into the water around us.

The battle would continue but it would have to continue without its captain and, also, as she insisted on coming with me, its quartermaster. Together Anne and I dived off the gunwale into bright blue water and swam for shore, and then began the trek up the path to the Observatory.

It wasn't long before we came upon the first corpses.

Just as the men on the galleon were fighting for their lives against the onslaught of the *Jackdaw*, so the men with Torres had been doing the same. They had been ambushed by the natives, the Observatory guardians, and from up ahead we could hear the sounds of more conflict: desperate shouts as the men at the rear of the column tried in vain to frighten off the natives.

'This land is under the protection of King Philip. Tell your men to disperse or die!'

But it was they who would die. As we passed through the undergrowth a short distance away from them I saw their uncomprehending faces go from the monolithic edifice of the Observatory – Where had *that* come from? – to scanning the long grass around them. They would die like that: terrified and uncomprehending.

At the entrance to the Observatory were more bodies, but the door was open and some men had clearly made it inside. Anne bade me go in; she would stand

guard. And so for a second time I entered that strange and sacred place, that huge temple.

As I stepped inside I remembered the last time, when Roberts had murdered his men rather than let them be unbalanced by what they saw inside. Sure enough, just as I crept into the vast entrance chamber, terrified Spanish soldiers were fleeing screaming, their eyes somehow blank, as though whatever life in them had already been extinguished. As though they were corpses running.

They ignored me and I let them go. Good. They'd distract the Observatory guardians on the outside. And I pressed onwards, climbing stone steps, passing along the bridge chamber – more terrified soldiers – then towards the main control chamber.

I was halfway there when the Observatory began to hum. The same skull-crushing sound I'd heard on my first visit. I broke into a run, pushing past more frantic soldiers trying to make their escape and dashing into the main chamber where stone crumbled from the walls as the Observatory seemed to shake and vibrate with the droning noise.

Torres stood at the raised control panel, trying to make himself heard above the din, calling to guards who were either no longer there or trying to make their escape, trying to negotiate the stone that fell around us.

'Search the area. Find a way to stop this madness,' he screamed with his hands over his ears. He turned and with a lurch saw me.

'He's here. Kill him,' he shouted, pointing. Spittle flew. In his eyes was something I'd never have believed him capable of: panic.

'Kill him!' Just two of his brave but foolhardy men were up to challenge, and as the chamber shook, seemingly working itself loose around us, I made short work of them. Until the only men left were Torres and I.

And now the Templar Grand Master cast his eye around the chamber, his gaze travelling from the dead bodies of his men back to me. The panic had gone now. Back was the Torres I remembered, and in his face was not defeat, nor fear, nor even sadness at his imminent death. There was fervour.

'We could have worked together, Edward,' he appealed with his hands outstretched. 'We could have taken power for ourselves and brought these miserable empires to their knees.'

He shook his head as if frustrated with me, as though I was an errant son.

(And no, sorry, mate, but I'm an errant son no longer.)

'There is so much potential in you, Edward,' he insisted, 'so much you have not yet accomplished. I could show you things. Mysteries beyond anything you could imagine.'

No. He and his kind had done nothing for me save to seek the curtailment of my freedom and take the lives of my friends. Starting with the night in Bristol when a torch was flung in a farmyard, his kind had brought me nothing but misery.

I drove the blade in and he grunted with pain as his mouth filled with blood that spilled over his lips.

'Does my murder fulfil you?' he asked weakly.

No, no it didn't.

'I'm only seeing a job done, Torres. As you would have done with me.'

'As we *have* done, I think,' he managed. 'You have no family any more, no friends, no future. Your losses are far greater than ours.'

'That may be, but killing you rights a far greater wrong than I ever did.'

'You honestly believe that?'

'You would see all of mankind corralled into a neatly furnished prison: safe and sober, yet dull beyond reason and sapped of all spirit. So, aye, with everything I've seen and learnt in these last years, I *do* believe it.'

'You wear your convictions well,' he said. 'They suit you …'

It was as though I'd been in a trance. The noise of the Observatory, the rattle of stone falling around me, the screams of the fleeing troops: all of it had faded into the background as I spoke to Torres, and I only became aware of it again when the last breath died on his lips and his head lolled on the stone. There was the noise of a distant battle, soldiers being ruthlessly despatched, before Anne, Adewalé and Ah Tabai burst into the chamber. Their swords were drawn and streaked with blood. Their pistols smoked.

'Torres awakened the Observatory something fierce,' I said to Ah Tabai. 'Are we safe?'

'With the device returned, I believe so,' he replied, indicating the skull.

Anne was looking around herself, open-mouthed. Even part-destroyed in the wake of the rockfall the chamber was still a sight to see. 'What do you call this place?' she said, awestruck.

'Captain Kenway's folly,' said Adewalé, shooting me a smile.

'We will seal this place and discard the key,' announced Ah Tabai, 'until another Sage appears, this door will remain locked.'

'There were vials when I came here last,' I told him, 'filled with the blood of ancient men, Roberts said. But they're gone now.'

'Then it's up to us to recover them,' said Ah Tabai with a sigh, 'before the Templars catch wind of this. You could join us in that cause.'

I could. I could. But …

'Only after I fix what I mangled back home.'

The old Assassin nodded, and then as though reminded of it he removed a letter from his robes that he handed to me. ‘It arrived last week.’

They left me as I read it.

And I think you know the news it contained, don’t you, my sweet?

66

October, 1722

We had good reason to celebrate. So we did. However, with my new knowledge had come a decreased interest in inebriation, so I left the exuberance in the hands of the *Jackdaw* crew, who built fires and roasted hogs and danced and sang until they had no energy left, then they simply collapsed and slept where they had stood and then pulled themselves to their feet, grabbed the nearest flask of liquor and began again.

Me, I sat on the terrace of my homestead with Adewalé and Ah Tabai.

'Gentlemen, how do you find it here?' I asked them.

I'd offered it – my home – as their base.

'It will work well for us,' said Ah Tabai, 'but our long-term goal must be to scatter our operations. To live and work among the people we protect, just as Altaïr Ibn-La'Ahad once counselled.'

'Well, until that time, it's yours as you see fit.'

'Edward …'

I had already stood to find Anne, but turned to Adewalé.

'Yes?'

'Captain Woodes Rogers survived his wounds,' he told me. I cursed, remembering the interruption. 'He has since returned to England. Shamed and in great debt, but no less a threat.'

'I will finish that job when I return. You have my word.'

He nodded, and we embraced before we parted, leaving me to join Anne.

We sat in silence for a moment, smiling at the songs, until I said, 'I'll be sailing for London in the next few months. I'd be a hopeful man if you were beside me.'

She laughed. 'England is the wrong way round the globe for an Irish woman.'

I nodded. Perhaps it was for the best. 'Will you stay with the Assassins?' I asked her.

She shook her head. 'No. I haven't that kind of conviction in my heart. You?'

'In time, aye, when my mind is settled and my blood is cooled.'

Just then we heard a cry from afar, a ship sailing into the cove. We looked at one another, both of us knowing what the arrival of the ship meant – a new life for me, a new life for her. I loved her in my own way, and I think she loved me, but the time had come to part, and we did it with a kiss.

'You're a good man, Edward,' said Anne, her eyes shining as I stood. 'And if you learn to keep settled to one place for more than a week, you'll make a fine father, too.'

I left her and headed down to the beach to where a large ship was coming into dock. The gangplank was lowered and the captain appeared, holding the hand of a little girl: a beautiful little girl, who shone brighter than hope, just nine years old.

And I thought you looked the spitting image of your mother.

67

A little vision, you were. Jennifer Kenway, a daughter I never even knew I had. Embarking on a voyage, which went against your grandfather's wishes but had your grandmother's blessing, you'd sailed to find me, in order to give me the news.

My beloved was dead.

(Did you wonder why I didn't cry, I wonder, as we stood on the dock at Inagua? So did I, Jenny. So did I.)

And on that voyage home I got to know you. And yet there were still things I had to keep from you, because I still had much I needed to do. Before, I talked about having loose ends to tie, business to take care of. Well, there were still loose ends to tie. Still business to settle.

I took a skeleton crew to Bristol, a few of my most trusted men. We sailed the Atlantic, a hard, rough crossing, made bearable by a stay in the Azores, then continued our journey to the British Isles and to Bristol. To home – to a place I hadn't visited for nigh on a decade. A place I had been warned against ever returning to.

As we came into the Bristol Channel the black flag of the *Jackdaw* was brought down, folded up and placed carefully in a chest in my cabin. In its place we raised the red ensign. It would be enough to allow us to land at least, and once the port marshals had worked out the *Jackdaw* was not a naval vessel, I'd be ashore and the ship anchored offshore.

And then I saw it for the first time in so long, the Bristol dock, and I caught my breath. I had loved Kingston, Havana and above all Nassau. But despite everything that had happened – or maybe because of it – this was still my home.

Heads turned in my direction as I strode along the harbour, a figure of mystery, dressed not like a pirate but something else. Perhaps some of the older ones remembered me: merchants I'd done business with as a sheep farmer, men I'd drunk with in the taverns when I'd boasted of going off to sea. And tongues would wag, and news would travel. How far, I wondered. To Matthew Hague

and Wilson? To Emmett Scott? Would they know that Edward Kenway was back, stronger and more powerful than before, and that he had scores to settle?

I found a boarding house in town and there rested the night. The next morning I bartered for a horse and saddle and set off for Hatherton, riding until I reached my father's old farmhouse.

Why I went there, I'm not quite sure. I think I just wanted to see it. And so for long moments that's what I did. I stood by the gate in the shade of a tree and contemplated my old home. It had been rebuilt, of course, and was only partly recognizable as the house in which I had grown up. But one thing that had remained the same was the outhouse: the outhouse where my marriage to Caroline had begun; the outhouse in which you were conceived, Jennifer.

I left, then halfway between Hatherton and Bristol, a road I knew so well, I stopped at a place I also knew well. The Auld Shillelagh. I tethered my horse outside, made sure she had water, then stepped in to find it almost exactly as I remembered: the low ceilings, a darkness that seemed to seep from the walls. The last time I was here I had killed a man. My first man. Many more had fallen beneath my blade since.

More to come.

Behind the bar was a woman in her fifties, and she raised her tired head to look at me as I approached.

'Hello, Mother,' I said.

68

She took me to a side table away from the prying eyes of the few drinkers there.

‘So it’s true then?’ she asked me. Her long hair had grey streaks in it. Her face was drawn and tired. It was only (*only?*) ten years since I’d last seen her but it was as though she had aged twenty, thirty, more.

All my fault.

‘What’s true, Mother?’ I asked carefully.

‘You’re a pirate?’

‘No, Mother, I’m not a pirate. No longer. I’ve joined an order.’

‘You’re a monk?’ She cast an eye over my robes.

‘No, Mother, I’m not a monk. Something else.’

She sighed, looking unimpressed. Over at the bar the landlord was towelling tankards, watching us with a hawk eye. He begrudged her the time she spent away from the bar but wasn’t about to say anything. Not with the pirate Edward Kenway around.

‘And you decided to come back, did you?’ she was saying. ‘I heard that you had. That you sailed into port yesterday, stepped off a glittering galleon like some kind of king. The big I-am, Edward Kenway. That’s what you always wanted, wasn’t it?’

‘Mother –’

‘That was what you were always going on about, wasn’t it? Wanting to go off and make your fortune, make something of yourself, become a man of quality, wasn’t it? That involved becoming a pirate, did it?’ She sneered. I didn’t think I’d ever seen my mother sneer before. ‘You were lucky they didn’t hang you.’

They still might, if they catch me.

‘It’s not like that any more. I’ve come to make things right.’

She pulled a face like she’d tasted something nasty. Another expression I’d never seen before. ‘Oh yes, and how do you plan to do that?’

I waved a hand. ‘Not have you working here, for a start.’

‘I’ll work wherever I like, young man,’ she scoffed. ‘You needn’t think you’re paying me off with stolen gold. Gold that belonged to other folks before they were forced to hand it to you at the point of your sword. Eh? Is that it?’

‘It’s not like that, Ma,’ I whispered, feeling young all of a sudden. Not like the pirate Edward Kenway at all. This wasn’t how I’d imagined it would be. Tears, embraces, apologies, promises. Not like this.

I leaned forward. ‘I don’t want it to be like this, Ma,’ I said quietly.

She smirked. ‘That was always your trouble, wasn’t it, Edward? Never happy with what you got.’

‘No …’ I began, exasperated. ‘I mean …’

‘I know what you *mean*. You mean you made a mess of things and then you left us to clear up your mess, and now you’ve got some finery about you, and a bit of money, you think you can come back and pay me off. You’re no better than Hague and Scott and their cronies.’

‘No, no, it’s not like that.’

‘I heard you arrived with a little girl in tow. Your daughter?’

‘Yes.’

She pursed her lips and nodded, a little sympathy creeping into her eyes. ‘It was her who told you about Caroline, was it?’

My fists clenched. ‘She did.’

‘She told you Caroline was sick with the pox and that her father refused her medicine, and that she ended up wasting away at that house on Hawkins Lane. She told you that, did she?’

‘She told me that, Ma, yes.’

She scratched at her head and looked away. ‘I loved that girl. Caroline. Really loved her. Like a daughter she was to me, until she went away.’ She shot me a reproachful look. *That was your fault.* ‘I went to the funeral, just to pay my respects, just to stand at the gate, but Scott was there and all his cronies, Matthew Hague and that Wilson fellow. They ran me off the place. Said I wasn’t welcome.’

‘They’ll pay for that, Ma,’ I said through clenched teeth. ‘They’ll pay for what they’ve done.’

She looked quickly at me. ‘Oh yes? How are they going to *pay* then, Edward? Tell me that. You going to kill them, are you? With your sword? Your pistols? Word is, they’ve gone into hiding, the men you seek.’

‘Ma …’

‘How many men have died at your hand, eh?’ she asked.

I looked at her. The answer, of course, was countless.

She was shaking, I noticed. With fury.

‘You think that makes you a man, don’t you?’ she said, and I knew her words were about to hurt more than any blade. ‘But do you know how many men your father killed, Edward? None. Not one. And he was *twice* the man you are.’

I winced. ‘Don’t be like this. I know I could have done things differently. I *wish* I’d done things differently. But I’m back now – back to sort out the mess I made.’

She was shaking her head. ‘No, no, you don’t understand, Edward. There is no mess any more. The mess needed sorting out when you left. The mess needed sorting out when your father and I cleared up what remained of our home and tried to start again. It put years on him, Edward. Years. The mess needed sorting out when nobody would trade with us. Not a letter from you. Not a word. Your daughter was born, your father died, and not a peep from the great explorer.’

‘You don’t understand. They threatened me. They threatened you. They said if I ever returned they’d hurt you.’

She pointed. ‘*You* did more hurting than *they* ever could, my son. And now you’re here to stir things up again, are you?’

‘Things have got to be put right.’

She stood. ‘Not in my name, they don’t. I’ll have nothing to do with you.’

She raised her voice to address everybody in the tavern. Only a few would hear her, but word would soon spread. ‘You hear that?’ she said loudly. ‘I disown him. The great and famous pirate Edward Kenway; he’s nothing to do with me.’

Hands flat on a tabletop she leaned forward and hissed, ‘Now *get out*, no-son-of-mine. Get out before I tell the soldiers where the pirate Edward Kenway is to be found.’

I left, and when, on the journey back to my boarding house in Bristol, I realized that my cheeks were wet, I allowed myself to cry, grateful for one thing. Grateful that there was nobody around to see my tears or hear my wails of grief.

69

So – they had gone to ground, the guilty men. And yes, there had been others there that night – the Cobleighs among them. But I had no desire to account for them all; little taste for taking the lives of men given orders. The men I wanted *gave* those orders: Hague, Scott and, of course, the man who left the insignia of the Templars on my face all those years ago. Wilson.

Men who hid from me. Whose guilt was confirmed by the fact that they were hiding from me. Good. Let them hide. Let them shake with fear.

They knew I was coming after them. And I was – I was coming after them. Tonight, all being well, Scott, Wilson and Hague would be dead.

But they knew I was coming, so my investigations would have to be conducted a little more discreetly. When I left my boarding house the next morning I did so knowing I was beneath the gaze of Templar spies. I ducked into a tavern I knew of old – better than my pursuers, no doubt – and thanked my lucky stars it still had the same rear privy it always had.

By the back door I held my breath against the stink, quickly stripped off my robes and changed into clothes I'd brought with me from the *Jackdaw* – clothes I'd last worn many, many moons ago: my long buttoned-up waistcoat, knee breeches, white stockings and a battered brown tricorne. And thus attired I left the tavern, emerging on a different street a different person. Just another merchant on his way to market.

I found her there, exactly where I had expected to, and jogged the basket on her arm so she'd know I was behind her, whispering, 'I got your message.'

'Good,' said Rose without turning her head, bending to inspect some flowers. With a quick look left and right she whipped out a headscarf and tied it over her head.

'Follow me.'

A moment later Rose and I loitered near some dilapidated stables in a deserted corner of the market. I glanced at the structure, then back again with a jolt of recognition. I'd stabled my own horse here many years ago. It had been new then and convenient for the market, but the sprawl of stalls had shifted over the

intervening years, its entrances had moved and the stables had fallen into disuse, fit only for loitering near, for conducting clandestine meetings, as we did now.

‘You’ve met young Jennifer, have you?’ she said.

She shifted the basket on her arm. She’d been a young girl when I’d first encountered her at the Auld Shillelagh. Ten years later she was still young but missing was that spark, that rebellious streak that had made her run away in the first place. A decade of drudgery had done that to her.

And yet, like the glowing sparks of a dying fire, there was some of her old nature left, because she’d sent me a letter requesting to meet me, and here she was, with things to tell me. Among them, I hoped, the whereabouts of her master and his friends.

‘I have,’ I told her. ‘I’ve met my daughter. She’s safe on my ship.

‘She has your eyes.’

I nodded. ‘She has her mother’s beauty.’

‘She’s a beautiful girl. We were all very fond of her.’

‘But wilful?’

Rose smiled. ‘Oh yes. She was determined that she should see you when Mistress Caroline passed away last year.’

‘I’m surprised Emmett allowed it.’

Rose chortled dryly. ‘He didn’t, sir. It was the mistress of the house who organized it, her and Miss Jennifer cooked it up between them. The first his nibs knew of it was when he woke up to find Miss Jennifer gone. He wasn’t happy. He wasn’t happy at all, sir.’

‘Meetings, were there?’

She looked at me. ‘You could say that, sir, yes.’

‘Who came to see him, Rose?’

‘Master Hague …’

‘And Wilson?’

She nodded her head.

All the conspirators.

‘And where are they now?’

‘I don’t rightly know, sir,’ she said.

I sighed. ‘Then why invite me here, if you’ve nothing to tell me?’

She turned her face to me. ‘I mean I don’t know where they’re hiding, sir, but I do know where Mr Scott plans to be tonight, for I have been asked to take him some fresh clothes to his offices.’

‘The warehouse?’

‘Yes, sir. He has business items to collect as well, sir. He plans to be there personally. I’ve been asked to go there when night has fallen.’

I looked at her long and hard. ‘Why, Rose?’ I said. ‘Why are you helping me like this?’

She glanced this way and that. ‘Because you once helped save me from a fate worse than death. Because Mistress Caroline loved you. And because …’

‘What?’

‘Because that man, he watched her die. He wouldn’t let her get the medicine she needed, not her or Mrs Scott, the both of them ill. Mrs Scott recovered but Mrs Kenway never did.’

It startled me to hear Caroline called Mrs Kenway. It had been so long since she’d been referred to that way.

‘Why did he deny them the medicine?’

‘Pride, sir. It was him who caught the smallpox first but he recovered. He thought Mrs Scott and Mrs Kenway should be able to as well. But she began to get such terrible blisters all over her face, sir. Oh, sir, you’ve never seen anything like it –’

I held up a hand, not wanting to hear more – wanting to preserve the image I had of Caroline.

‘There was an epidemic in London and we think Mr Scott picked it up there. Even the royal family were in fear of it.’

‘You didn’t get it?’

She looked at me guiltily. ‘The staff were inoculated, sir. Head butler saw to it. Swore us to silence.’

I sighed. ‘Good for him. He may have saved you a great deal of suffering.’

‘Sir.’

I looked at her. ‘Tonight, then?’

‘Tonight, sir, yes.’

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And it *had* to be tonight.

‘Are you Edward Kenway?’ she’d said to me.

My landlady. Edith was her name. She’d knocked on the door to my room and stood on the threshold unwilling to venture further. Her face was bloodless, her voice shook and her fingers worried at the hem of her pinafore.

‘Edward Kenway?’ I smiled. ‘Now, why would you say a thing like that, Edith?’

She cleared her throat. ‘They say that a man arrived on a boat. A man dressed much like you are now, sir. And that the man is Edward Kenway, who once called Bristol his home.’

The colour had come back into her cheeks now, and she reddened, continuing, ‘And there are others who say that Edward Kenway has returned home to settle scores, and that those against whom he bears his grudge have gone into hiding, but being powerful men have called resources against you – I mean, *him*.’

‘I see,’ I said carefully, ‘and what manner of resources might these be?’

‘A troop of soldiers headed for Bristol, sir, expected to arrive this very evening.’

‘I see. And no doubt heading straight for wherever this Edward Kenway has his lodgings, whereupon Edward Kenway would be forced to defend himself, and there would surely be a bloody battle, with many lives lost and much damage caused?’

She swallowed. ‘Yes, sir.’

‘Well, you can rest assured, Edith, that no such unpleasantness will occur *here* tonight. For I’m sure Edward Kenway will make certain of it. And know this of him, Edith. It’s true he was a pirate once and that he did his fair share of despicable things, but he’s chosen a different path now. He knows that to see differently we must think differently. And he has changed his thinking.’

She looked at me blankly. ‘Very good, sir.’

‘And now I shall take my leave,’ I told her. ‘Doubtless never to return.’

‘Very good, sir.’

On the bed was a bundle of my things that I picked up and slung over one shoulder, then I thought better of it and instead picked out what I needed: the skull and a small pouch of coins that I opened, pressing gold into Edith's hand.

'Oh, sir, that's more than generous.'

'You've been very kind, Edith,' I said.

She stood to one side. 'There's a back door, sir,' she said.

I went via a tavern where I knew to find the *Jackdaw*'s coxswain, awaiting my orders.

'Birtwistle.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Bring the *Jackdaw* to the harbour tonight. We're leaving.'

'Yes, sir.'

And then I went on to the warehouse district, using the backstreets and rooftops. I stayed low and in the shadows.

And I thought, *Oh, Mary, if you could only see me now.*

Scott's warehouse was one of many near the ports, the masts of berthed ships visible over the roofs. Most of the warehouses were deserted, shut up for the night. Only his had signs of life: flaming cressets that painted a small loading area a shade of flickering orange, empty carts nearby, and standing by the closed door a pair of guards. Not soldiers, at least – had they arrived in the city yet? – but local scar-faces slapping clubs into their palms, who probably thought this was an easy job, who were probably looking forward to a taste of ale later.

I stayed where I was, a shadow in the darkness, watching the door. Was he already in there? I was still debating when to make my move when Rose arrived. She wore the same headscarf as earlier and her basket bulged with clothes for her hated lord and master, Emmett Scott.

The two strong-arms at the door shared a lascivious look as they stepped forward to intercept her. Sticking to the side of the adjacent warehouse I crept within earshot.

'Is Mr Scott here?' she asked.

'Ah,' said one of the scar-faces in a heavy West Country accent, grinning. 'Well, that all depends on who's asking, don't it, m'dear?'

'I have clothes for him.'

'You'd be the maid, would you?'

'That's right.'

'Well, he's here, so you'd better go in.'

I was close enough to see her roll her eyes as they stepped aside and let her in.

Right. So Scott was in there.

In the dark I tested the action of my blade. Mustn't be too hasty, I thought. Mustn't kill him. Scott had some talking to do before he died.

I moved round the edge of the warehouse wall, and the two strong-arms were just a few feet away from me now. It was just a question of waiting for the right moment to str–

From inside came a scream. Rose. And it was no longer a question of waiting for the right time. It was a time for action. I'd sprung from the dark, covered the distance between myself and the sentries, engaged the blade and slashed the throat of the first one before Rose's scream had even died down. The second one cursed and swung his club but I caught his flailing arm, jammed him up against the warehouse wall and finished him with a blade in his back. He slid down the wall even as I crouched at the wicket door of the warehouse, raised a hand and pushed it open.

A musket ball zinged over my head as I rolled into the entrance way, getting a quick impression of a warehouse stacked with tea chests, a gantry with offices on it at one end.

There were three figures on the gantry, one of them standing on the rail as though about to jump the twenty feet or so to the ground.

I came to rest behind a stack of crates, peeked round the edge and pulled back as another ball smacked into the wood nearby, showering me with wood chips. But my quick look was enough to confirm that, yes, there were three people on the gantry above me. There was Wilson, who stood with a pistol aimed at my hiding place. To one side of him was Emmett Scott, sweating as with trembling, frantic fingers he tried to reload another pistol to hand to Wilson.

And above them was Rose, who wobbled unsteadily on the railing, terrified. Her mouth bled. The punishment for her warning scream no doubt. Her hands had been tied and she wore a noose round her neck. All that stopped her from dropping from her makeshift gallows was Wilson, who held her with his other hand.

If he let go, she fell.

'Hold it there, Kenway,' called Wilson as the dust settled, 'or you'll have the death of the maid on your hands.'

They'd disarm me. They'd kill me, then hang Rose for her treachery.

Not if I have anything to do with it.

From my gun belt I pulled a pistol, and checked the ball and powder. 'It was you there that night, wasn't it, Wilson? The leader? You were the one in the hood?'

I had to know. I had to be sure.

‘Aye, it was. And if it had been left up to me you would all have died that night.’

I almost smiled. *You missed your chance.*

Up on the rail Rose whimpered but checked herself.

‘Now throw out the hidden blade, Kenway, I can’t hold her for ever,’ warned Wilson.

‘And what about you, Emmet?’ I called. ‘Were you there?’

‘I was not,’ he retorted, flustered and frightened.

‘You would have celebrated my death, though?’

‘You have been a thorn in my side, Kenway.’

‘Your pride has been your undoing, Scott. Your pride has been the undoing of us all.’

‘You know nothing.’

‘I know that you allowed my beloved to die.’

‘I loved her, too.’

‘No kind of love that I recognize, Scott.’

‘You wouldn’t understand.’

‘I understand that your ambition and thirst for power have led to the deaths of many people. I understand that now you will pay.’

From inside my robes I took a throwing knife and weighed it in my palm. *Bit different to using trees for target practice.*

I stood and inched towards the edge of the stack, taking deep, slow breaths.

Ready?

Ready.

‘Come on, Kenway,’ called Wilson, ‘we don’t have all n–’

I rolled out from my cover and darted forward and found my aim, firing my pistol and using the throwing knife at the same time.

Both met their targets. Emmet Scott span away with a hole in his forehead, his pistol dropping uselessly to the planks of the gantry, while Wilson had returned fire before my knife found his shoulder. Yelling in pain he staggered back and fell against the office wall with the blade embedded, fountaining blood as he scrabbled in vain for the second pistol.

His ball had found its mark. I felt it thud into my shoulder but couldn’t let it take me down. Couldn’t even let it slow me down. Because Wilson had let go of Rose and Rose was falling, her mouth wide in a scream I didn’t hear above the echoes of the gunshots and the rushing of pain in my head.

She fell. And the rope unspooled behind her. And I had an image of failure, where the rope tautened and her body jerked and her neck snapped.

No.

I hit a crate at full pelt, stepped up in a run and launched myself off. I twisted, engaged my blade and with a yell of effort sliced the rope, caught Rose round the waist and the pair of us slammed heavily and painfully to the stone floor of the warehouse.

But alive.

From above I heard Wilson cursing. I snatched a second pistol from my belt and squinted through the gaps in the boards above me, seeing the light flicker and squeezing off a shot. There came another scream from the gantry then a crash as he made his way into the offices.

I dragged myself to my feet. The pain from my wound was intense, and the older wound in my flank flared up, too, making me limp as I made it to the steps of the gantry and climbed in pursuit of Wilson. I charged through the office where I found an open back door leading to steps, and at the top I caught my breath and leaned on the rail for support as I peered over the warehouses.

No sign. Just the distant clattering of ships at rest and the squawk of gulls. I concentrated, using the sense, and I heard something. But not Wilson. What I heard was the sound of marching feet as they approached the port area.

They were coming. The soldiers were coming.

I cursed and limped back inside to check on Rose. She would be okay. I ran back to follow a trail of blood left by Wilson.

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You were safe in my cabin. Asleep, so I'm told. So you missed what happened next. And for that I'm thankful.

I reached the harbour to find that Wilson had died on the way. His body lay at the bottom of the steps. He'd been going to a ship I recognized. One that when I'd last seen it was called the *Caroline* but had since been renamed in honour of the woman Matthew Hague had gone on to marry. It was called the *Charlotte*.

Hague was in there. A man awaiting death, though he didn't know it yet. I could see poorly defined figures in the grey haze of the evening moving across the stern gunwale. Guards. But it didn't matter. Nothing was going to stop me getting on board that ship.

If the guards had seen or heard Wilson fall they probably thought he was a drunk. And if they saw me squatting by his body then they probably thought I was a drunk, too. They didn't care. Not yet.

I counted four of them as I raced along the harbour wall until I reached where the *Jackdaw* had not long been docked. In between the two ships was another smaller sailing boat held by a line that I unwound and let go, giving the stern of the craft a shove to set it off before dashing back to my ship.

'Hanley,' I said addressing the quartermaster.

'Yes, sir?'

'Prepare the guns.'

He'd been sitting with his feet up on the navigation table but dragged them off. 'What? Why, sir? And bloody hell, sir, what's up with you?'

'Musket ball in the shoulder.'

'Did you get the men you wanted?'

'Two of them.'

'I'll fetch the doc …'

'Leave it, Hanley,' I growled. 'It can wait. Look, there's a vessel to our starboard, name of *Charlotte*. On it is the third man I seek. Ready the starboard guns and if my plans fail blast her out of the water.'

I ran to the cabin door then stopped, screwing up my face in pain as I turned to him. 'And Hanley?'

‘Yes, sir?’ He had stood, his face a picture of worry.

‘You’d better prepare the stern guns as well. And make sure the crew is armed. There are soldiers on the way.’

‘Sir?’

I gave him an apologetic look.

‘Just look sharp, Hanley. If all goes well we’ll be out of this in moments.’

He didn’t look reassured. He looked even more worried. I gave him what I hoped was a confident smile, then swept a wedge from beneath the cabin door as I left.

The sailing boat had begun its drift out to sea. I heard a shout from the deck of the *Charlotte* as they spotted it. The laughter. *Fools*. They saw the joke, not the danger. I leapt overboard, planting my feet on the stone of the harbour then racing the few yards to the stern of the *Charlotte*.

‘It’s Wilson,’ I shouted in my best approximation of the dead enforcer as I clambered up the ladder. A face appeared over the gunwale to greet me and I planted my fist in it, dragged him over the rail and hurled him to the stone below. His screams alerted a second man who came running to what he assumed was the scene of an accident – until he saw me and the blade, which gleamed in the moonlight before I swept it backhanded across his throat.

Ignoring the last two sentries I ran up the deck towards the captain’s cabin, peered through the window and was treated to the sight of Matthew Hague, an older Matthew Hague, and a worried one by the looks of things, standing by a table. With him was his draughtsman.

With a glance to see the two sentries lumbering up the deck towards me, I dragged open the door of the cabin.

‘*You*,’ I said to the draughtsman.

Hague dropped a goblet he’d been holding. They both goggled at me.

I risked another glance back at the sentries. I cursed, slammed the cabin door shut, wedged it and turned to meet the two guards.

They could have escaped I told myself as they died. It was their choice to fight me. To my port the hatches of the *Jackdaw*’s gun deck were opening and the muzzles of guns appeared. *Good lads.* I saw men on deck brandishing muskets and swords. Somebody shouted, ‘You need a hand, cap’n?’

No, I didn’t. I turned back to the cabin door, pulled the wedge free and snatched open the door. ‘Right, last chance,’ I ordered the draughtsman, who practically threw himself at me.

‘Archer,’ wailed Hague, but neither of us was listening as I hauled Archer out of the cabin and jammed it shut behind him, Hague imprisoned now.

‘Get off the ship,’ I barked at Archer, who needed no further invitation, scrabbling for the stern.

Now I could hear the marching feet of soldiers as they approached the harbour wall.

‘Tar!’ I appealed to my crew on the other deck. ‘Barrels of tar and be quick about it!’

A barrel was tossed to me from the *Jackdaw* and I set upon it, opening it and spreading it by the door to the cabin.

‘Please …’ I could hear Hague from inside. He was thumping on the wedged-shut door. ‘Please …’

But I was deaf to him. The marching was closer now. Horse hooves. The rumble of cart wheels. I glanced to the harbour wall, expecting to see the tops of their bayonets as I emptied a second barrel of tar on the deck.

Would it be enough? It would have to do.

And now I saw them. The muskets of the soldiers as they appeared, silhouetted along the top of the harbour wall. At the same time they saw me and pulled the muskets from their shoulders and took aim. By my side the crew of the *Jackdaw* did the same as I snatched up a torch and leapt to the ratlines, climbing to a point where I could let go of the torch, dive off the rigging and escape the flames.

If the muskets didn’t get me first, that was.

And then came the command.

‘Hold your fire!’

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The order came from a carriage that had pulled up on the harbour, its door opening before it had even finished drawing to a halt.

Out skipped two men: one dressed like a footman, who arranged the steps for the second man, a tall, lean gentleman who wore smart clothes.

And now a third man appeared. A portly gentleman in a long white wig, frilled shirt and fine satin jacket and breeches. A man who looked as though he'd enjoyed many a lunch in his time, and many a glass of port and brandy to go with those many lunches.

The footman and the tall man gaped as they became aware of the many guns pointing in their direction. By accident or design they'd placed themselves in the middle: the guns of the soldiers on one side, the carriage guns and muskets of the *Jackdaw* on the other, and me on the rigging, ready to drop a flaming torch to the deck below.

The portly gentleman moved his mouth as though exercising it in readiness to speak. He laced his hands across his chest, rocked back on his heels and called up to me, 'Do I have the pleasure of addressing Captain Edward Kenway?'

'And who might you be?' I called back.

That produced a shudder of amusement from the soldiers on the harbour wall.

The portly man smiled. 'You've been away a long time, Captain Kenway.'

I agreed I had.

His lips smacked and rearranged themselves into a smile. 'Then you are forgiven for not knowing who I am. I think, however, that you will know my name. It is Walpole. Sir Robert Walpole. I am the First Lord of the Treasury, Chancellor of the Exchequer and Leader of the House of Commons.'

And I was just thinking what an impressive title that was, and how he must be one of the most powerful men in the land when … *Walpole*. *It couldn't be*.

But he was nodding. 'Yes, indeed, Captain Kenway. Duncan Walpole, the man whose life and identity you took as your own, was my cousin.'

I felt myself tense even more. What game was he playing? And who was the tall man by his side? It struck me that he had a family resemblance to Matthew Hague. Was this his father, Sir Aubrey Hague?

Walpole was waving a reassuring hand. ‘It is quite all right. Not only was my cousin involved in affairs I keep at a distance, but he was a treacherous man. A man blessed, I’m afraid, with few principles. A man prepared to sell the secrets of those who trusted him to the highest bidder. I was ashamed to see him bear the Walpole name. I think perhaps in many ways, you have done my family a good turn.’

‘I see,’ I called, ‘and that’s why you’re here, is it? To thank me for killing your cousin?’

‘Oh no, not at all.’

‘Then to what do I owe the pleasure of this visit? As you can see, I have other matters to attend to.’

The torch grumbled as I waved it for effect. From the wedged cabin of the *Charlotte* came a banging sound as Hague tried to get free. Otherwise there was a tense hush as the soldiers and the sailors peered at one another along the barrels of their weapons, both sets of men awaiting their orders.

‘Well, Captain Kenway, it’s exactly those matters that exercise us, I’m afraid,’ called Walpole, ‘for I cannot allow you to continue on your present course of action. As a matter of fact, I’m going to have to ask you to toss the torch in the sea and come down from there right away. Or, alas, I shall have the men shoot you.’

I chortled. ‘You shoot me and my men return fire, Sir Robert. I fear even you yourself might get caught in the crossfire. Not to mention your friend – Sir Aubrey Hague, is it?’

‘It is indeed, sir,’ said the tall man stepping forward. ‘I come to plead clemency for my son.’

His son had been a disappointment to him, I could see.

‘Let me see your fingers,’ I demanded.

Hague raised his hands. A Templar ring glittered. My heart hardened.

‘And you, Sir Robert.’

His hands remained laced across his stomach. ‘You’ll see no ring on me, Captain Kenway.’

‘Why does the idea tickle you? From what I’ve seen the Templars enjoy rank and status. How am I to know that I am not addressing their Grand Master?’

He smiled. ‘Because no power is *absolute*, Captain Kenway, and my purpose here is not to act as ambassador for one side or indeed the other. My purpose here is to prevent an act of barbarism.’

I scoffed. *Barbarism?* It didn’t seem to bother them when they were burning my parents’ home. Where was Sir Robert Walpole then? Sipping port, perhaps, with his Templar friends? Congratulating himself on abstaining from their

schemes. He could afford to, of course. His wealth and power were already assured.

From the cabin Matthew Hague snivelled and whimpered.

‘You have returned to these shores on a mission of vengeance, I take it?’ called Walpole.

‘There are those with whom I have scores to settle, yes.’

Walpole nodded. ‘Woodes Rogers being one of them?’

I gave a short, surprised laugh. ‘Yes. He would be one of them.’

‘Would it make a difference if I told you that Rogers currently languishes in debtors’ prison? That the wounds you inflicted on him have left his health in a terrible state of disrepair? That his Order has disowned him? His hot temper, his continued slave trading. He is a broken man, Captain Kenway. I wonder if perhaps you might consider that matter settled?’

He was right. What more harm could my blade do to Rogers, other than to put him out of his misery?

‘He is not my immediate concern,’ I called. ‘That honour belongs to the man in the cabin below.’

Walpole gave a sad smile. ‘A silly, shallow boy, influenced by others. You must believe me when I tell you, Captain Kenway, that the principal malefactors in that particular episode are already dead by your hands. Rest assured that Matthew’s current shame is punishment enough for his wrongdoing.’

I took a deep breath. I thought of my mother asking me how many I’d killed. I thought of Black Bart’s cruelty. I thought of Mary Read’s spirit and Adewalé’s courage and Blackbeard’s generosity.

And I thought of you. Because Torres had been wrong when he said I had nobody. I did have somebody. *I had you.* You who shone with hope.

‘Today I should like to make you an offer, Captain Kenway,’ continued Walpole. ‘An offer I hope you will find favourable, that will finally draw a curtain across this whole sorry affair.’

He outlined his proposals. I listened. And when he was finished, I told him my answer and dropped the torch.

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Except of course I dropped it into the sea.

Because he offered pardons for my men and I, and I saw their faces turn expectantly to me, every one of them a wanted man with the chance of having his slate wiped clean. He offered us all, every man-jack of us, a new life.

And Walpole had offered much more besides. Property. The chance to make something of myself with business contacts in London. When I'd finally climbed down from the rigging, the soldiers had put down their muskets and the crew of the *Jackdaw* relaxed. Then Matthew Hague had been released and run to his father and offered me tearful apologies, while Walpole took my arm and led me away, speaking of who I would be introduced to in London: the Stephenson-Oakley family, a lawyer, an assistant by the name of Birch to help me in my new business dealings.

My mercy would be handsomely rewarded, he assured me. In return he would see to it that I became the man I had always wanted to be: a man of quality.

Of course I had since gained greater expectations of myself. But money, business and a house in London would be a fine foundation on which to build a new and richer life. A fine foundation indeed.

A place I could use to attend to my other business. *My Assassin business.*

Shall we go, my darling? Shall we set sail for London?

List of Characters

Adewalé: former slave and, later, quartermaster and Assassin
Ah Tabai: Assassin
Blaney: sailor
Anne Bonny: barmaid at the Old Avery and, later, pirate
Calico Jack Rackham: pirate
Seth Cobleigh: Tom Cobleigh's son
Tom Cobleigh: Seth Cobleigh's father
Alexander Dolzell: Edward's first captain
Julien DuCasse: Templar
El Tiburón: executioner and Torres's bodyguard
Matthew Hague: unsuccessful suitor to Caroline Scott, son of Sir Aubrey Hague
Benjamin Hornigold: pirate founder of Nassau
Julian: friend of the Cobleighs
Bernard Kenway: Edward's father
Caroline Kenway, née Scott: Edward's wife
Edward Kenway: Assassin
Jennifer (Jenny) Kenway: Edward and Caroline's daughter
Linette Kenway: Edward's mother
James Kidd: pirate
Laurens Prins: Dutch slaver
Mary Read: true identity of James Kidd, Assassin
Bartholomew Roberts aka Black Bart: Sage and pirate
Woodes Rogers: Templar pirate-hunter and, later, governor of the Bahamas
Rose: servant to the Scotts
Emmett Scott: Caroline's father, Bristol tea merchant
Mrs Scott: Caroline's mother

Edward Thatch aka Blackbeard: privateer turned pirate
Laureano Torres: Templar governor of Havana
Charles Vane: pirate
Dylan Wallace: recruitment man
Duncan Walpole: Templar
Wilson: manservant to Matthew Hague

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Etienne Allonier
Antoine Ceszynski
Maxime Desmettre
Two Dots
Julien Delalande
Damien Guillotin
Gwenn Berhault
Alex Clarke
Hana Osman
Andrew Holmes
Virginie Sergent

Clémence Deleuze

Oliver Bowden

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Extract from the Journal of Arno Dorian

12 September 1794

On my desk lies her journal, open to the first page. It was all I could read before a flood tide of emotion took my breath away and the text before me was splintered by the diamonds in my eyes. Tears had coursed down my cheeks as thoughts of her returned to me: the impish child playing games of hide-and-seek; the firebrand I came to know and love in adulthood, tresses of red hair across her shoulders, eyes intense beneath dark and lustrous lashes. She had the balance of the expert dancer and the master swordsman. She was as comfortable gliding across the floor of the palace beneath the desirous eye of every man in the room as she was in combat.

But behind those eyes were secrets. Secrets I was about to discover. I pick up her journal once again, wanting to place my palm and fingertips to the page, caress the words, feeling that on this page lies part of her very soul.

I begin to read.

Extracts from the Journal of Élise de la Serre

9 April 1778

i.

My name is Élise de la Serre. I am ten years old. My father is François, my mother Julie, and we live in Versailles: glittering, beautiful Versailles, where neat buildings and grand chateaus reside in the shadow of the great palace, with its lime-tree avenues, its shimmering lakes and fountains, its exquisitely tended topiary.

We are nobles. The lucky ones. The privileged. For proof we need only take the fifteen-mile road into Paris. It is a road lit by overhanging oil lamps, because in Versailles we use such things, but in Paris the poor use tallow candles, and the smoke from the tallow factories hangs over the city like a death shroud, dirtying the skin and choking the lungs. Dressed in rags, their backs hunched either with the weight of their physical burden or of mental sorrow, the poor people of Paris creep through streets that never seem to get light. The streets stream with open sewers, where mud and human effluent flow freely, coating the legs of those who carry our sedan chairs as we pass through, staring wide-eyed from the windows.

Later, we take gilded carriages back to Versailles and pass figures in the fields, shrouded in mist like ghosts. These barefoot peasants tend noble land and starve if the crop is bad, virtual slaves of the landowners. At home I listen to my parents' tales of how they must stay awake to swish sticks at frogs whose croaking keeps landowners awake, and how they must eat grass to stay alive. Meanwhile the nobles prosper, exempt from paying taxes, excused from military service and spared the indignity of the *corvée*, a day's unpaid labour working on the roads.

My parents say Queen Marie Antoinette roams the hallways, ballrooms and vestibules of the palace dreaming up new ways to spend her dress allowance while her husband King Louis XVI lounges on his *lit de justice*, passing laws that enrich the lives of nobles at the expense of the poor and starving. They talk darkly of how these actions might foment revolution.

ii.

There is an expression to describe the moment you suddenly understand something. It is the moment when ‘the penny drops’.

As a small child it never occurred to me to wonder why I learnt history, not etiquette, manners and poise; I didn’t question why Mother joined Father and the Crows after dinner, her voice raised in disagreement to debate with as much force as they ever did; I never wondered why she didn’t ride side-saddle, nor why she never needed a groom to steady her mount, and I never wondered why she had so little time for fashion or court gossip. Not once did I think to ask why my mother was not like other mothers.

Not until the penny dropped.

iii.

She was beautiful, of course, and always well-dressed, though she had no time for the manner of finery worn by the women at court, of whom she would purse her lips and talk disapprovingly. According to her they were obsessed with looks and status, with *things*.

‘They wouldn’t know an idea if it hit them between the eyes, Élise. Promise me you’ll never end up like them.’

Intrigued, wanting to know more about how I should never end up, I used my vantage point at the hem of Mother’s skirt to spy on these hated women. What I saw were over-powdered gossips who pretended they were devoted to their husbands even as their eyes roamed the room over the rims of their fans, looking for unsuspecting lovers to snare. Unseen I would glimpse behind the powdered mask, when the scornful laughter dried on their lips and the mocking look died in their eyes. I’d see them for what they really were, which was frightened. Frightened of falling out of favour. Of slipping down the society ladder.

Mother was not like that. For one thing she couldn’t have cared less about gossip. And I never saw her with a fan, and she hated powder, and she had no time whatsoever for charcoal beauty spots and alabaster skin, her sole concession to fashion being shoes. Otherwise what attention she gave her comportment was for one reason and one reason only: to maintain decorum.

And she was absolutely devoted to my father. She stood by him – at his side, though, never behind him – she supported him, was unswervingly loyal to him. My father has advisors, Messieurs Chretien Lafrenière, Louis-Michel Le Peletier, Charles Gabriel Sivert and Madame Levesque. With thier long black coats, dark felt hats and eyes that never smiled, I called them ‘the Crows’, and I would often hear Mother defending Father to them, backing him regardless, despite what she might have said to him behind closed doors.

It’s been a long time, though, since I last heard her debating with Father. They say she may die tonight.

10 April 1778

i.

She survived the night.

I sat by her bedside, held her hand and spoke to her. For a while I had been under the delusion that it was me comforting her, until the moment she turned her head and gazed at me with milky but soul-searching eyes, and it became apparent that the opposite was true.

There were times last night when I gazed out of the window to see Arno in the yard below, envying how he could be so oblivious to the heartache just feet away from him. He knows she's ill, of course, but consumption is commonplace, death at the doctor's knee an everyday occurrence, even here in Versailles. And he is not a de la Serre. He is our ward, and thus not privy to our deepest, darkest secrets, nor our private anguish. Moreover, he has barely known any other state of affairs. To Arno, Mother is a remote figure attended to on the upper floors of the chateau; to him she is defined purely by her illness.

Instead, my father and I share our turmoil via hidden glances. Outwardly we take pains to appear as normal, our mourning mitigated by two years of grim diagnosis. Our grief is another secret hidden from our ward.

ii.

We're getting closer to the moment that the penny dropped. And thinking about the first incident, the first time I really began to wonder about my parents, and specifically Mother, I imagine it like a signpost along the road towards my destiny.

It happened at the convent. I was just five when I first entered it, and my memories of it are far from fully formed. Just impressions, really: long rows of beds; a distinct but slightly disconnected memory of glancing outside a window crowned with frost and seeing the tops of the trees rising above billowing skirts of mist; and … the Mother Superior.

Bent over and bitter, the Mother Superior was known for her cruelty. She'd wander the corridors of the convent with her cane across her palms as though presenting it to a banquet. In her office it was laid across her desk. Back then we'd talk of it being 'your turn', and for a while it was mine, when she hated my attempts at happiness, begrudged the fact that I was swift to laughter and would always call my happy smile a smirk. The cane, she said, would wipe that smirk off my face.

Mother Superior was right about that. It did. For a while.

And then one day Mother and Father arrived to see the Mother Superior, on what matter I have no idea, and I was called to the office at their request. There I found my parents turned in their seats to greet me, and Mother Superior standing behind her desk, the usual look of undisguised contempt upon her face, a frank assessment of my many shortcomings only just dry on her lips.

If it had been Mother alone to see me I should not have been so formal. I would have run to her and hoped I might slip into the folds of her dress and into another world, out of that horrible place. But it was both of them, and my father was my king. It was he who dictated what modes of politeness we abided by; he who had insisted I was placed in the convent in the first place. So I approached and curtsied and waited to be addressed.

My mother snatched up my hand. How she even saw what was there I have no idea, since it was by my side, but somehow she'd caught glimpse of the marks left by the cane.

'What are these?' she demanded of the Mother Superior, holding my hand towards her.

I had never seen the Mother Superior look anything less than composed. But now I would say that she paled. In an instant my mother had transformed from proper and polite, just what was expected of a guest of the Mother Superior, to an instrument of potential anger. We all felt it. Mother Superior the most.

She stammered a little. 'As I was saying, Élise is a wilful girl and disruptive.'

'So she's caned?' demanded my mother, her anger rising.

Mother Superior squared her shoulders. 'How else do you expect me to keep order?'

Mother snatched up the cane. 'I expect you to be *able* to keep order. Do you think this makes you strong?' She slapped the cane to the table. Mother Superior jumped and swallowed, and her eyes darted to my father who was keeping watch with an odd, unreadable expression, as though these were events that did not require his participation. 'Well, then you are sorely mistaken,' added Mother. 'It makes you weak.'

She stood, glaring at the Mother Superior, and made her jump again as she slapped the cane to the desk a second time. Then she took my hand. ‘Come along, Élise.’

We left, and from then on I have had tutors to teach me schoolwork.

I knew one thing as we bustled out of the convent and into our carriage for a silent ride home. As Mother and Father bristled with things left unsaid, I knew that ladies did not behave the way my mother had just done. Not normal ladies, anyway.

Another clue. This happened a year or so later, at a birthday party for a spoiled daughter in a neighbouring chateau. Other girls my age played with dolls, setting them up to take tea, only a tea for dolls, where there was no real tea or cake, just little girls pretending to feed tea and cake to dolls, which to me, even then, seemed stupid.

Not far away the boys were playing with toy soldiers, so I stood to join them, oblivious to a shocked silence that fell over the gathering.

My nursemaid Ruth dragged me away. ‘You play with dolls, Élise,’ she said firmly but nervously, her eyes darting as she shrank beneath the disapproving stare of the other nursemaids. I did as I was told, sinking to my haunches and affecting interest in the pretend tea and cake, and with the embarrassing interruption over, the lawn returned to its natural state: boys playing with toy soldiers, the girls with their dolls, nursemaids watching us both, and not far away a gaggle of mothers, high-born ladies who gossiped on wrought-iron lawn chairs.

I looked at the gossiping ladies and saw them with Mother’s eyes. I saw my own path from girl on the grass to gossiping lady, and with a rush of absolute certainty realized I didn’t want that. I didn’t want to be like those mothers. I wanted to be like my own mother, who had excused herself from the gaggle of gossips and could be seen in the distance, alone, at the water’s edge, her individuality plain for all to see.

iii.

I have had a note from Mr Weatherall. Writing in his native English he tells me that he wishes to see Mother and asks that I meet him in the library at midnight to escort him to her room. He urges me not to tell Father.

Yet another secret I must keep. Sometimes I feel like one of those poor wretches we see in Paris, hunched over beneath the weight of expectations forced upon me.

I am only ten years old.

11 April 1778

i.

At midnight, I pulled on a gown, took a candle and crept downstairs to the library where I waited for Mr Weatherall.

He had let himself into the chateau, moving like a mystery, the dogs undisturbed, and he entered the library so quietly that I barely even heard the door open and close. He crossed the floor in a few strides, snatched his wig from his head – the accursed thing, he hated it – and grasped my shoulders.

‘They say she is fading fast,’ he said, and needed it to be hearsay.

‘She is,’ I told him, dropping my gaze.

His eyes closed, and though he was not at all old – in his mid-forties, a little older than Mother and Father – the years were etched upon his face.

‘Mr Weatherall and I were once very close,’ Mother had said before. She’d smiled as she said it. I fancy that she blushed.

ii.

It was a freezing cold day in February the first time I met Mr Weatherall. That winter was the first of the really cruel winters, but while in Paris the River Seine had flooded and frozen, and the poverty-stricken were dying in the streets, things were very different in Versailles. By the time we awoke the staff had made up the fires that roared in the grates, and we ate a steaming breakfast and wrapped up warm in furs, our hands kept warm by muffs as we took morning and afternoon strolls in the grounds.

That particular day the sun was shining, although it did nothing to offset the bone-chilling cold. A crust of ice sparkled prettily on a thick layer of snow, and it was so hard that Scratch, our Irish wolfhound, was able to walk upon it without his paws sinking in. He’d taken a few tentative steps and then on realizing his good fortune given a joyous bark and dashed off ahead while Mother and I made our way across the grounds and to the trees at the perimeter of the south lawn.

Holding her hand, I glanced over my shoulder as we walked. Far away our chateau shone in the reflection of sun and snow, its windows winking, and then, as we stepped out of the sun and into the trees, it became indistinct, as though shaded by pencils. We were further out than usual, I realized, no longer within reach of its shelter.

‘Do not be alarmed if you see a gentleman in the shadows,’ said Mother, bending to me slightly. Her voice was quiet, I clutched her hand a little tighter at the very idea, and she laughed. ‘Our presence here is no coincidence.’

I was six years old then, and had no idea that a lady meeting a man in such circumstances might have ‘implications’. As far as I was concerned, it was simply my mother meeting a man, and of no greater significance than her talking to Emanuel, our gardener, or passing the time of day with Jean, our coachman.

Frost confers stillness on the world. In the trees it was even quieter than on the snow-covered lawn and we were absorbed by an absolute tranquillity as we took a narrow path into the depth of the wood.

‘Mr Weatherall likes to play a game,’ said my mother, her voice hushed in honour of the peace. ‘He may like to surprise us, and one should always be aware of what surprises lie in store. We take into account our surroundings and cast our expectations accordingly. Do you see tracks?’

The snow around us was untouched. ‘No, Mama.’

‘Good. Then we can be sure of our radius. Now, where might a man hide in such conditions?’

‘Behind a tree?’

‘Good, good – but what about here?’ She indicated overhead and I craned my neck to gaze into the canopy of branches above, the frost twinkling in shards of sunlight.

‘Observe everywhere, always,’ smiled Mother. ‘Use your eyes to see, don’t incline your head if at all possible. Don’t show to others where your attention is directed. In life you will have opponents, and those opponents will attempt to read you for clues as to your intentions. Maintain your advantage by making them guess.’

‘Will our visitor be high in a tree, Mama?’ I asked.

She chuckled. ‘No. As a matter of fact, I have seen him. Do you see him, Élise?’

We had stopped. I gazed at the trees in front of us. ‘No, Mama.’

‘Show yourself, Freddie,’ called Mother, and sure enough, a few yards ahead of us a grey-bearded man stepped from behind a tree, swept his tricorn from his head and gave an exaggerated bow.

The men of Versailles were a certain way. They looked down their noses at anybody not like them. They had what I thought of as ‘Versailles smiles’, hoisted halfway between bemused and bored, as though constantly on the verge of delivering the witty quip by which, it seemed, all men of court were judged.

This man was not a man of Versailles; the beard alone saw to that. And though he was smiling, it was not a Versailles smile; instead it was soft but serious, the face of a man who thought before he spoke and made his words count.

‘You cast a shadow, Freddie,’ smiled Mother as he stepped forward, kissed her proffered hand, then did the same to me, bowing again.

‘The shadow?’ he said, and his voice was warm and growly but uncultured, the voice of a seaman or soldier. ‘Oh, bloody hell, I must be losing my touch.’

‘I hope not, Freddie,’ laughed Mother. ‘Élise, meet Mr Weatherall, an Englishman. An associate of mine. Freddie, meet Élise.’

An associate? Like the Crows? No, he was nothing like them. Instead of glaring at me he took my hand, bowed and kissed it. ‘Charmed, mademoiselle,’ he rasped, his English accent mangling the word ‘mademoiselle’ in a way that I couldn’t help but find charming.

Mother fixed me with a serious expression. ‘Mr Weatherall is our confidant and protector, Élise. A man to whom you may always turn when in need of help.’

I looked at her, feeling a little startled. ‘But what about Father?’

‘Father loves us both dearly, and would gladly give his life for us, but men as important as your father need shielding from their domestic responsibilities. This is why we have Mr Weatherall, Élise – that your Father need not be troubled by those matters concerning his womenfolk.’ An even more significant look came into her eyes. ‘Your father need not be troubled, Élise, do you understand?’

‘Yes, Mama.’

Mr Weatherall was nodding. ‘I am here to serve, mademoiselle,’ he said to me.

I curtsied. ‘Thank you, monsieur.’

Scratch had arrived, greeting Mr Weatherall excitedly, the two of them evidently old friends.

‘Can we talk, Julie?’ asked the protector, replacing his tricorn and indicating that the two of them might walk together.

I stayed some steps behind, hearing brief snatches and disjointed snippets of their hushed conversation. I heard ‘Grand Master’ and ‘King’, but they were just words, the kind I was used to hearing from behind the doors of the chateau. It’s only in the years since that they’ve taken on a much greater resonance.

And then it happened.

And looking back I can’t remember the sequence of events. I remember seeing Mother and Mr Weatherall tense at the same time as Scratch bristled and

growled. Then my mother wheeled. My gaze went in the direction of her eyes and I saw it there: a wolf standing in the undergrowth to my left, a black-and-grey wolf standing absolutely still in the trees, regarding me with hungry eyes.

Something appeared from within Mother's muff, a silver blade, and in two quick strides she had crossed to me, swept me up and away and deposited me behind her so that I clung to her skirts as she faced the wolf, her blade outstretched.

Across the way Mr Weatherall held a straining hackles-risen Scratch by the scruff of his neck, and I noticed that his other hand reached for the hilt of a sword that hung at his side.

'Wait,' commanded Mother. An upraised hand stopped Mr Weatherall in his tracks. 'I don't think this wolf will attack.'

'I'm not so sure, Julie,' warned Mr Weatherall. 'That is an exceptionally hungry-looking wolf you've got there.'

The wolf stared at my mother. She looked right back, talking to us at the same time. 'There's nothing for him to eat in the hills; it's desperation that has brought him to our grounds. But I think this wolf knows that by attacking us, he makes an enemy of us. Far better for it to retreat in the face of implacable strength and forage elsewhere.'

Mr Weatherall gave a short laugh. 'Why am I getting the whiff of a parable here?'

'Because, Freddie,' smiled Mother, 'there is a parable here.'

The wolf stared for a few moments more, never taking its eyes from Mother, until at last it dipped its head, turned and trotted slowly away. We watched it disappear into the trees, and my mother stood down, her blade replaced in her muff.

I looked at Mr Weatherall. His jacket was once again buttoned and there was no sign of his sword.

And I came one step closer to the penny dropping.

iii.

I showed Mr Weatherall to my mother's room and he asked that he see her alone, assured me that he could let himself out. Curious, I peered through the keyhole and saw him take a seat by her side, reach for her hand and bow his head. Moments later I thought I heard the sound of him weeping.

12 April 1778

i.

I gaze from my window and remember last summer, when in moments of play with Arno I ascended from my cares and enjoyed blissful days of being a little girl again, running with him through the hedge maze in the grounds of the palace, squabbling over dessert, little knowing that the respite from worry would be so temporary.

Every morning I dig my nails into my palms and ask, ‘Is she awake?’ and Ruth, knowing I really mean, ‘Is she alive?’, reassures me that Mother has survived the night.

But it won’t be long now.

ii.

So. The moment that the penny dropped. It draws nearer. But first, another signpost.

The Carrolls arrived in the spring of the year I first met Mr Weatherall. And what a gorgeous spring it was. The snows had melted to reveal lush carpets of trimmed lawn beneath, returning Versailles to its natural state of immaculate perfection. Surrounded by the immaculately cut topiary of our grounds we could barely hear the hum of the town, while away to our right the slopes of the palace were visible, wide stone steps leading to the columns of its vast frontage. Quite the splendour in which to entertain the Carrolls from Mayfair in London, England. Mr Carroll and Father spent hours in the drawing room, apparently deep in conversation and were occasionally visited by the Crows, while Mother and I were tasked with entertaining Mrs Carroll and her daughter May, who lost no time at all telling me that she was ten and that because I was only six that made her much better than me.

We invited them for a walk and wrapped up against a slight morning chill soon to be burned away by the sun: Mother and I, Mrs Carroll and May.

Mother and Mrs Carroll walked some steps in front of us. Mother, I noticed, wore her muff, and I wondered if the blade was secreted within. I had asked about it, of course, after the incident with the wolf.

‘Mama, why do you keep a knife in your muff?’

‘Why, Élise, in case of threats from the marauding wolves, of course.’ And with a wry smile she added, ‘Wolves of the four-legged and two-legged variety. And, anyway, the blade helps the muff keep its shape.’

But then, as was quickly becoming customary, she made me promise to keep it as one of our *vérités cachées*. Mr Weatherall was a *vérité cachée*. Which meant that when Mr Weatherall gave me a sword lesson, that became a *vérité cachée* as well.

Secrets by any other name.

May and I walked a polite distance behind our mothers. The hems of our skirts brushed the lawn so that from a distance we would appear to be gliding across the grounds, four ladies in perfect transport.

‘How old are you, Smell-bag?’ whispered May to me, though as I’ve said, she had already established our ages. Twice.

‘Don’t call me “Smell-bag”,’ I said primly.

‘Sorry, Smell-bag, but tell me again how old you are.’

‘I’m six,’ I told her.

She gave a six-is-a-terrible-age-to-be chortle, like she herself had never been six. ‘Well, I am ten,’ she said haughtily. (And, as an aside, May Carroll said everything ‘haughtily’. In fact, unless I say otherwise, just assume she said it haughtily.)

‘I know you are ten,’ I hissed, fondly imagining sticking out a foot and watching her sprawl to the gravel of the driveway.

‘Just so you don’t forget,’ she said, and I pictured little bits of gravel sticking to her bawling face as she picked herself up from the ground. What was it Mr Weatherall had told me? The bigger they are, the harder they fall.

(And now I have reached the age of ten I wonder if I am arrogant like her? Do I have that mocking tone when I talk to those younger or lower in status than myself? According to Mr Weatherall, I’m overconfident, which I suppose is a nice way of saying ‘arrogant’, and maybe that’s why May and I rubbed up against each other the way we did, because deep down we were actually quite similar.)

As we took our turn around the grounds, the words spoken by the ladies ahead of us reached our ears. Mrs Carroll was saying, ‘Obviously we have concerns with the direction your Order appears to want to take.’

‘You have *concerns*?’ said Mother.

‘Indeed. Concerns about the intentions of your husband’s associates. And as we both know it is our duty to ensure our husbands do the right thing. Perhaps, if you don’t mind my saying, your husband is giving certain factions leave to dictate his policies?’

‘Indeed, there are high-ranking members who favour, shall we say, more *extreme* measures regarding the changing of the old Order.’

‘This concerns us in England.’

My mother chortled. ‘Of course it does. In England you refuse to accept change of any kind.’

Mrs Carroll bridled. ‘Not at all. Your reading of our national character lacks subtlety. But I’m beginning to get a feel for where your own loyalties lie, Madame de la Serre. You yourself are petitioning for change?’

‘If change be for the better.’

‘Then do I need to report that your loyalties lie with your husband’s advisors? Has my errand been in vain?’

‘Not quite, madame. How comforting it is to know that I enjoy the support of my English colleagues in opposing drastic measures. But I cannot claim to share your ultimate goal. While it’s true there are forces pushing for violent overthrow, and while it’s true that my husband believes in a God-appointed monarch – indeed, that his ideals for the future encompass no change at all – I myself tread a middle line. A third way, if you like. Perhaps it won’t surprise you to learn that I consider my ideology to be the more moderate of the three.’

They walked on some steps, and Mrs Carroll nodded, thinking.

Into the silence my mother said, ‘I’m sorry if you don’t feel our goals are aligned, Mrs Carroll. My apologies if that makes me a somewhat unreliable confidante.’

The other woman nodded. ‘I see. Well, if I were you, Madame de la Serre, I would use my influence with both sides in order to propose your middle line.’

‘On that issue I shouldn’t like to say, but be assured your journey has not been in vain. My respect for you and your branch of the Order remains as steadfast as I hope it does in return. From me you can rely on two things: firstly, that I will abide by my own principles; and, secondly, that I will not allow my husband to be swayed by his advisors.’

‘Then you have given me what I want.’

‘Very good. It is some consolation, I hope.’

Behind, May inclined her head to me. ‘Have your parents told you of your destiny?’

‘No. What do you mean, “destiny”?’

She put a hand to her mouth, pretending to have said too much. ‘They will do, perhaps, when you turn ten years old. Just as they did me. How old are you, by the way?’

I sighed. ‘I am six.’

‘Well, perhaps they will tell you when you are ten, as they did me.’

In the end, of course, my parents’ hand was forced, and they had to tell me my ‘destiny’ much earlier, because two years later, in the autumn of 1775, when I had just turned eight, Mother and I went shopping for shoes.

iii.

As well as the chateau in Versailles, we had a sizeable villa in the city, and whenever we were there Mother liked to go shopping.

As I have said, while she was contemptuous of most fashions, detesting fans and wigs, conforming to the very minimum of flamboyance when it came to her gowns, there was one thing about which she was fastidious.

Shoes. She loved shoes. She bought silk pairs from Christian in Paris, where we would go, regular as clockwork, once every two weeks, because it was her one extravagance, she said, and mine too, since we always came away with a pair of shoes for me as well as her.

Christian was located in one of Paris’s more salubrious streets, far away from our villa on the Île Saint-Louis. But still, everything is relative and I found myself holding my breath as we were helped out of the comfortable and fragrant-smelling interior of our carriage and into the noisy, surging street, where the sound was of shouting and horses’ hooves and a constant rumbling of carriage wheels. The sound of Paris.

Above us women leaned from windows across folded arms and watched the world go by. Lining the street were stalls that sold fruit and fabric, barrows piled high with goods manned by shouting men and women in aprons who immediately called to us. ‘Madame! Mademoiselle!’

My eyes were drawn to the shadows at the edges of the street, where I saw blank faces in the gloom, and I fancied I saw starvation and desperation in those eyes as they watched us reproachfully, hungrily.

‘Come along now, Élise,’ said Mother, and I picked up my skirts just as she did and trod daintily over the mud and excrement beneath our feet, and we were ushered into Christian by the owner.

The door slammed behind us, the outside world denied. A shop boy busied himself at our feet with a towel, and in moments it was as though we had never

made that perilous crossing, those few feet between our carriage and the door of one of Paris's most exclusive shoe shops.

Christian wore a white wig tied back with a black ribbon, a frock coat and white breeches. He was a perfect approximation of half-nobleman, half-footman, which was how he saw himself on the social ladder. He was fond of saying that it was in his power to make women feel beautiful, which was the greatest power a man possessed. And yet to him Mother remained an enigma, as though she was the one customer upon whom his power did not quite work. It didn't, and I knew why. It was because other women simply saw the shoes as tributes to their own vanity, whereas Mother adored them as things of beauty.

Christian, however, hadn't yet reached that conclusion so every visit was marked by him barking up the wrong tree.

'Look, madame,' he said, presenting to her a pair of slippers adorned with a buckle. 'Every single lady through that door goes weak at the knees at the mere sight of this exquisite new creation, yet only Madame de la Serre has ankles pretty enough to do them justice.'

'Too frivolous, Christian,' smiled my mother, and with an imperious wave of the hand swept past him to other shelves. I cast an eye at the shop boy who returned my look with an unreadable gaze, and followed.

She chose briskly. She made her choices with a certainty that Christian remained bewildered by her. I, her constant companion, saw the difference in her as she chose her shoes. A lightness. A smile she shone in my direction as she slipped on yet another shoe and admired her beautiful ankles in the mirror to the accompanying gasps and bleats of Christian – every shoe a work of art in progress, my mother's foot the final flourish.

We made our choices, mother arranged for payment and delivery, and then we left, Christian helping us out on to the street where …

There was no sign of Jean, our coachman. No sign of our carriage at all.

'Madame?' said Christian, his face creased with concern. I felt her stiffen, saw the tilt of her chin as her eyes roamed the street around us.

'There's nothing to worry about, Christian,' she assured him breezily. 'Our carriage is a little late, that is all. We shall enjoy the sights and sounds of Paris as we await its return here.'

It was beginning to get dark and there was a chill in the air, which had thickened with the first of the evening fog.

'That is quite out of the question, madame, you cannot wait on the street,' said an aghast Christian.

She looked at him with a half-smile. 'To protect my sensibilities, Christian?'

‘It is dangerous,’ he protested, and leaned forward to whisper with his face twisted into a slightly disgusted expression, ‘*and the people*.’

‘Yes, Christian,’ she said, as though letting him into a secret, ‘just people. Now please, go back inside. Your next customer values her exclusive time with Paris’s most attentive shoe salesman as highly as I do, and would no doubt be most put out having to share her time with two strays awaiting their negligent coachman.’

Knowing my mother as a woman who rarely changed her mind, and knowing she was right about the next customer, Christian bowed acquiescence, bid us *au revoir* and returned to the shop, leaving us alone on the street where the barrows were being removed and people dissolved into shapes moving within the murky fog.

I gripped her hand. ‘Mama?’

‘Don’t concern yourself, Élise,’ she said, raising her chin. ‘We shall hire a carriage to return us to Versailles.’

‘Not to the villa here in Paris, Mama?’

‘No,’ she said, thinking and chewing her lip a little. ‘I think I should prefer that we return to Versailles.’

She was tense and watchful as she began to lead us along the street, incongruous in our long skirts and bonnets. From her purse she took a compact to check her rouge and we stopped to gaze in the window of a shop.

Still, as we walked, she used the opportunity to teach me. ‘Make your face impassive, Élise. Don’t show your true feelings, especially if they are nerves. Don’t appear to hurry. Maintain your calm exterior. Maintain control.’

The crowds were thinning out now. ‘At the square they have carriages for hire, and we shall be there in a few moments. First, though, I have something I need to tell you. When I tell you, you must not react, you must not turn your head. Do you understand?’

‘Yes, Mama.’

‘Good. We are being followed. He has been following us since we left Christian. A man in a tall felt hat and cloak.’

‘Why? Why is the man following us?’

‘Now that, Élise, is a very good question, and that is something I intend to find out. Just keep walking.’

We stopped to look into another shop window. ‘I do believe our shadow has disappeared,’ Mother said thoughtfully.

‘Then that’s a good thing,’ I replied, with all the naivety of my unburdened eight-year-old self.

There was concern on her face. ‘No, my darling, it’s not a good thing. I liked him where I could see him. Now I have to wonder if he really has gone or, as seems more likely, he’s sped on ahead to cut us off before we can reach the square. He will expect us to use the main road. We shall fox him, Élise, by taking another route.’

Taking my hand she led us off the street, first on to a narrower highway, and then into a long alleyway, dark apart from a lit lantern at each end.

We were halfway along when the figure stepped out of the fog in front of us. Disturbed mist billowed along the slick walls on either side of the narrow alley. And I knew Mother had made a mistake.

iv.

He had a thin face framed by a spill of almost pure white hair, and looked like a dandyish but down-at-heel doctor in his long black cape and tall shabby hat, the ruff of a shirt spilling over his collar.

He carried a doctor’s bag that he placed to the ground and opened with one hand, all without taking his eyes off us as he took something from it, something long and curved.

Then he smiled and drew the dagger from its sheath, and it gleamed wickedly in the dark.

‘Stay close, Élise,’ whispered Mother. ‘Everything’s going to be all right.’

I believed her because I was an eight-year-old girl and of course I believed my mother. But also because having seen her with the wolf I had good reason to believe her.

Even so, fear nibbled at my insides.

‘What is your business, monsieur?’ she called levelly.

He made no answer.

‘Very well. Then we shall return to where we came from,’ said Mother loudly, taking my hand, about to depart.

At the alley entrance a shadow flickered and a second figure appeared in the orange glow of the lantern. It was a lamplighter; we could tell by the pole he carried. Even so, Mother stopped.

‘Monsieur,’ she called to the lamplighter cautiously. ‘Might I ask you to call off this gentleman who is bothering us?’

The lamplighter said nothing, going instead to where the lamp burned and raising his pole. Mama began to speak. ‘Monsieur …’ And I wondered why the man would be trying to light a lamp that was already lit and realized too late that

the pole had a hook on the end – the hook that they used for dousing the flame of the candle inside.

‘Monsieur …’

The entrance was plunged into darkness. We heard him drop his pole with a clatter, and as our eyes adjusted I could see him reach into his coat to bring something out. Another dagger. Now he, too, moved forward a step.

Mother’s head swung from the lamplighter to the doctor.

‘What is your business, monsieur?’ she asked the doctor.

In reply the doctor brought his other arm to bear. With a snicking sound a second blade appeared from his wrist.

‘Assassin,’ she said, with a smile, as he moved in. The lamplighter was close now too – close enough for us to see the harsh set of his mouth and his narrowed eyes. Mother jerked her head in the other direction and saw the doctor, both blades held at his side. Still he smiled. He was enjoying this – or trying to make it look as though he was.

Either way, Mother was as immune to his malevolence as she was to the charms of Christian, and her next move was as graceful as a dance step. Her heels clip-clopped on the stone as she kicked out one foot, bent and drew a boot knife, all in the blink of an eye.

One second we were a defenceless woman and child trapped in a darkened passageway, the next we were not: we were a woman brandishing a knife to protect her child. A woman who, by the way she’d drawn her weapon and the way she was now poised, knew exactly what to do with the knife.

The doctor’s eyes flickered. The lamplighter stopped. Both given pause for thought.

She held her knife in her right hand, and I knew something was amiss because she was left-handed, and presented her shoulder to the doctor.

The doctor moved forward. At the same time my mother passed her knife from her left hand to her right, and her skirts pooled as she dipped and with her right hand outflung for balance slashed her left across the front of the doctor whose frock coat opened just as neatly as though cut by a tailor, the fabric instantly soaked with blood.

He was cut but not badly wounded. His eyes widened and he lurched backwards, evidently stunned by the skill of Mother’s attack. For all his sinister act, he looked frightened, and amid my own fear I felt something else: pride and awe. Never before had I felt so protected.

Still, though he had faltered he stood his ground, and as his eyes flicked to behind us, Mother twisted too late to prevent the lamplighter grabbing me with a choking arm round my neck.

‘Lay down your knife, or –’ was what the lamplighter started to say.

But never finished, because half a second later he was dead.

Her speed took him by surprise – not just the speed with which she moved but the speed of her decision, that if she allowed the lamplighter to take me hostage then all was lost. And it gave her the advantage as she swung into him, finding the space between my body and his, leading with her elbow, which with a yell she jabbed into his throat.

He made a sound like *boak* and I felt his grip give, then saw the flash of a blade as Mother pressed home her advantage and drove her boot knife deep into his stomach, shoving him up against the alley wall and with a small grunt of effort driving the blade upwards, then stepping smartly away as the front of his shirt darkened with blood and bulged with his spilling guts as he slid to the floor.

Mother straightened to face a second attack from the doctor but all we saw of him was his cloak as he turned and ran, leaving the alley and running for the street.

She grabbed my arm. ‘Come along, Élise, before you get blood on your shoes.’

v.

There was blood on Mother’s coat. Apart from that there was no way of telling she’d recently seen combat.

Not long after we arrived home messages were sent and the Crows bustled in with a great clacking of walking canes, huffing and puffing and talking loudly of punishing ‘those responsible’. Meanwhile, the staff fussed, put their hands to their throats and gossiped round corners, and Father’s face was ashen and I noticed how he seemed compelled to keep embracing us, holding us both a little too tightly and a little too long and breaking away with eyes that shone with tears.

Only Mother seemed unruffled. She had the poise and authority of one who has acquitted themselves well. Rightly so. Thanks to her, we had survived the attack. I wondered, did she feel as secretly thrilled as I did?

I would be asked to give my account of events, she had warned me in the hired carriage on the way back to our chateau. In this regard I should follow her lead, support everything she said, and say nothing to contradict her.

And so I listened as she told versions of her story, first to Olivier, our head butler, then to my father when he arrived, and lastly to the Crows when they bustled in. And though her stories acquired greater detail in the telling, and she

answered all questions fired at her, they all lacked one very important detail. The doctor.

‘You saw no hidden blade?’ she was asked.

‘I saw nothing to identify my attackers as Assassins,’ she replied, ‘thus I can’t assume it was the work of Assassins.’

‘Common street robbers are not so organized as this man seems to have been. You can’t think it a coincidence that your carriage was missing. Perhaps Jean will turn up drunk but perhaps not. Perhaps he will turn up dead. No, madame, this has none of the hallmarks of an opportunistic crime. This was a planned attack on your person, an act of aggression by our enemies.

Eyes would flick to me. Eventually I was asked to leave the room, which I did, finding a seat in the hallway outside, listening to the voices from the chamber as they bounced off marble floors and to my ears.

‘Grand Master, you must realize this was the work of Assassins.’

(Although to my ears, it was the work of ‘assassins’ and so I sat there thinking, ‘Of course it was the work of assassins, you stupid man. Or “would-be assassins” at least.’)

‘Like my wife, I would rather not leap to any false conclusions,’ replied Father.

‘Yet you’ve you posted extra guards.’

‘Of course I have, man. I can’t be too careful.’

‘I think you know in your heart, Grand Master.’

My father’s voice rose. ‘And what if I do? What would you have me do?’

‘Why, take action at once, of course.’

‘And would that be action to avenge my wife’s honour or action to overthrow the king?’

‘Either would send a message to our adversaries.’

Later, the news arrived that Jean had been discovered with his throat cut. I went cold, as though somebody had opened a window. I cried. Not just for Jean but, shamefully, for myself as well. And I watched and listened as a shock descended on the house and there were tears from below-stairs and the voices of the Crows were once more raised, this time in vindication.

Again they were silenced by Father. When I looked out of the window, I could see men with muskets in the grounds. Around us, everybody was jumpy. Father came to embrace me time and time again – until I got so fed up I began wriggling away.

‘Élise, there’s something we have to tell you.’

And this is the moment you’ve been waiting for, dear reader of this journal, whoever you are – the moment when the penny dropped; when I finally understood why I had been asked to keep so many *véritées cachées*; when I discovered why my father’s associates called him Grand Master; and when I realized what they meant by ‘Templar’ and why ‘assassin’ actually meant ‘Assassin’.

They had called me into Father’s office and asked for chairs to be gathered by the fire before asking the staff to withdraw completely. Father stood while Mother sat forward, her hands on her knees, comforting me with her eyes. I was reminded of when once I had had a splinter and Mother had held me and comforted me and hushed my tears while Father gripped my finger and removed it.

‘Élise,’ he began, ‘what we are about to say was to have waited until your tenth birthday. But events today have no doubt raised many questions in your mind, and your mother believes you are ready to be told, so … here we are.’

I looked at Mother, who reached to take my hand, bathing me in a comforting smile.

Father cleared his throat.

This was it. Whatever dim ideas I’d formed about my future were about to change.

‘Élise,’ he said, ‘you will one day become the French head of a secret international order that is centuries old. You, Élise de la Serre, will be a Templar Grand Master.’

‘Templar Grand Master?’ I said, looking from Father to Mother.

‘Yes.’

‘Of France?’ I said.

‘Yes. Presently, I hold that position. Your mother also holds a high rank within the Order. The gentlemen and Madame Levesque who visit, they too are knights of the Order and, like us, they are committed to preserving its tenets.’

I listened, not really understanding but wondering why, if all these knights were committed to the same thing, they spent every meeting shouting at one another.

‘What are Templars?’ I asked instead.

My father indicated himself and Mother, then extended his hand to include me in the circle. ‘We all are. We are Templars. We are committed to making the world a better place.’

I liked the sound of that. I like the sound of making the world a better place. ‘How do you do it, Papa?’

He smiled. ‘Ah, now, that is a very good question, Élise. Like any other large, ancient organization there are differing opinions on how best to achieve our ends. There are those who think we should violently oppose those who oppose as. Others who believe in peacefully spreading our ideologies.’

‘And what are they, Papa?’

He shrugged. ‘Our motto is “May the father of understanding guide us.” You see, what we Templars know is that despite exhortations otherwise, people don’t want real freedom and true responsibility because these things are too great a burden to bear, and only the very strongest minds can do so.

‘We believe people are good but easily led towards wickedness, laziness and corruption, that they require good leaders to follow – leaders who will not exploit their negative characteristics but instead seek to celebrate the positive ones. We believe peace can be maintained this way.’

I could literally feel my horizons expand as he spoke. ‘Do you hope to guide the people of France that way, Father?’ I asked him.

‘Yes, Élise, yes we do.’

‘How?’

‘Well, let me ask you – how do *you* think?’

My mind went blank. How did I think? It felt like the most difficult question I had ever been asked. I had no idea. He looked at me kindly and yet I knew he expected an answer. I looked towards Mother, who squeezed my hand encouragingly, imploring me with her eyes, and I found my beliefs in words I had heard her speak myself to Mr Weatherall and to Mrs Carroll.

I said, ‘Monsieur, I think our present monarch is corrupted beyond redemption, that his rule has poisoned the well of France and that in order for the people’s faith to be restored in the monarchy King Louis needs to be set aside.’

My answer caught him off-guard and he looked startled, casting a quizzical look at Mother, who shrugged as though to say *nothing to do with me*, even though it was her words I was parroting.

‘I see,’ he said. ‘Well, your mother is no doubt pleased to hear you espouse such views, Élise, for in this matter she and I are not in full agreement. Like you she believes in change. Myself, I know that the monarch is appointed by God and I believe that a corrupt monarch can be persuaded to see the error of his ways.’

Another quizzical look and a shrug and I moved quickly on. ‘But there are other Templars, Papa?’

He nodded. ‘Across the world, yes. There are those who serve the Order. Those who are sympathetic to our aims. However, as you and your mother discovered today, we have enemies, too. Just as we are an ancient order hoping

to shape the world in our image, so there is an opposing order, one with as many adherents sensitive to their own aims. Where we hope to unburden the good-thinking people of the responsibility of choice and be their guardians, this opposing order invites chaos and gambles on anarchy by insisting man should think for himself. They advocate casting aside traditional ways of thinking that have done so much to guide humanity for thousands of years in favour of a different kind of freedom. They are known as Assassins. We believe it was Assassins who attacked you today.'

'But, monsieur, I heard you say you weren't sure …'

'I said that purely in order to quench the war-like thirst of some of the more vocal members of our Order. It can only be Assassins who attacked you, Élise. Only they would be so bold as to kill Jean and send a man to kill the wife of the Grand Master. No doubt they hope to destabilize us. On this occasion they failed. We must make sure that if they try again they fail again.'

I nodded. 'Yes, Father.'

He glanced at Mother. 'Now, I expect your mother's defensive actions today came as a surprise to you?'

They hadn't. That 'secret' encounter with the wolf had seen to that.

'Yes, monsieur,' I said, catching Mother's eye.

'These are skills that all Templars must have. One day you will lead us. But before that you will be initiated as a Templar, and before that you will learn the ways of our Order. Starting tomorrow you will begin to learn combat.'

Again I caught Mother's eye. I had already begun to learn combat. I had been learning combat for over a year now.

'I realize this may be a lot to take in, Élise,' continued Father as my mother coloured slightly. 'Perhaps you saw your life as being similar to other girls of your age. I can only hope the fact that it will be so different is not a source of anxiety for you. I can only hope you embrace the potential you have to fulfil your destiny.'

I'd always thought I wasn't like the other girls. Now I knew for sure.

vii.

The following morning Ruth dressed me for a walk in the grounds. She fussed and tutted and mumbled under her breath that I shouldn't be taking such risks after what had happened yesterday, how we had only just escaped the evil man who had attacked us; and how Mother and I might be lying dead in that alleyway but for the mysterious gentleman who had been passing who had seen off the robber.

So that was what the staff had been told. Lots of lies, lots of secrets. It thrilled me to know that I was one of only two people – well, three, I suppose, if you counted the doctor – who knew the full truth of what had happened yesterday, one of a select number who knew it was Mother who had dealt with the attack, not some mystery man – and one of the select few who knew the full extent of the family business, not to mention my own part in it.

I had awakened that morning with sunshine in my life. At last all those *vérités cachées* I'd been asked to keep made sense. At last I knew why it was that our family seemed so different to the others, why I myself had never fitted in with the other children. It was because my destiny lay along a different path to theirs, and always had.

And best of all: 'Your mother shall be your tutor in all things,' Father had said with a warm smile at Mother, who in turn had reflected his love to me. With a smile he stopped himself. 'Well, perhaps not in *all* things. Perhaps in matters of ideology you would be better advised to heed the words of your father the Grand Master.'

'François,' Mother had chided, 'the child shall make up her own mind. The conclusions she reaches shall be her own.'

'My love, why do I have the distinct impression that for Élise, today's events are not the surprise they might have been?'

'What do you think we ladies talk about in our perambulations, François?'

'Shoes?'

'Well, yes,' she conceded, 'we do indeed talk about shoes, but what else?'

He understood, shaking his head, wondering how he could have been so blind as to miss what had been happening right under his nose.

'Did she know about the Order before today?' he asked her.

'Not as such,' she said, 'though I daresay she was prepared for the revelation.'

'And weapons?'

'She has had a little training, yes.'

Father indicated for me to stand. 'Let's see if you have learnt your *en garde*, Élise,' he said, adopting the position himself, his right arm outstretched and forefinger pointed like a blade.

I did as I was told. Father shot an impressed look at my mother and studied my posture, walking round me as I bathed in the glow of his approval. 'Right-handed like her father,' he chuckled, 'not a lefty like her mother.'

I bounced slightly on my knees, checking my balance, and my father smiled once more. 'Do I detect the hand of a certain Englishman in our daughter's training, Julie?'

‘Mr Weatherall has been helping me in filling Élise’s extracurricular hours, yes,’ she agreed airily.

‘I see. I had thought we were seeing a little more of him than usual at the chateau. Tell me, does he still hold a torch for you?’

‘François, you embarrass me,’ chided Mother.

(At the time I had no idea what they meant, of course. But I do now. Seeing Mr Weatherall the other night, a broken man. Oh, I do now.)

Father’s face became serious. ‘Julie, you know I trust you in all things and if you have been tutoring the child, then I support you in that, too, and if it helped Élise keep a cool head during yesterday’s attack, then it’s been more than justified. But Élise will be Grand Master one day. She will follow in my footsteps. In matters of combat and tactics she may be your protégé, Julie, but in matters of ideology she must be mine. Is that understood?’

‘Yes, François,’ smiled Mother sweetly. ‘Yes, that is understood.’

A look passed between Mother and me. An unspoken *vérité cachée*.

viii.

And so, having escaped Ruth’s unnecessary concern, I arrived in the reception hall ready for my walk with Mother.

‘You will take Scratch, and the guards, please, Julie,’ Father told her in a tone of voice that brooked no argument.

‘Of course,’ she said, and indicated to one of the men who lurked in the shadows of the reception hall, our whole house feeling a little more crowded all of a sudden.

He came forward. It was Mr Weatherall. For a second he and Father regarded one another carefully, before Mr Weatherall bowed deeply and the two shook hands.

‘François and I have told Élise what lies in store for her,’ said my mother.

Mr Weatherall’s eyes slid from my father’s face to mine to me and he nodded before bowing deeply again, extending his palm to kiss the back of my hand, making me feel like a princess.

‘And how does that make you feel, young Élise, knowing that one day you will lead the Templars?’

‘Very grand, monsieur,’ I said.

‘I’ll bet it does,’ he said.

‘François has correctly guessed that Élise has been receiving a little training,’ said Mother.

Mr Weatherall turned his attention back to Father. ‘Of course,’ he said, ‘and I trust my tutelage has not given the Grand Master offence?’

‘As I explained last night, I trust my wife implicitly concerning such matters. I know that with you, Freddie, they are in good hands.’

Just then Olivier approached, maintaining a distance until he was ushered forward to whisper in his master’s ear. Father nodded and addressed Mother. ‘I must take my leave, my dear,’ said Father, ‘our “friends” are here to visit.’

The Crows, of course. They had returned for a morning of shouting. And it was funny how knowing what I did cast my father in a new light. He wasn’t just my father any more. Not just my mother’s husband. But a busy man. A man of responsibility, whose attention was constantly required. A man whose decisions changed lives. The Crows were entering as we left, politely greeting Mother and Mr Weatherall, and crowding into the reception hall, which was suddenly very busy and alive with more talk of avenging yesterday’s attack and ensuring that Jean had not died in vain.

Eventually we stepped outside, the three of us, and walked for some way before Mr Weatherall spoke. ‘So, Élise, how do you *really* feel, knowing your destiny?’ he asked.

‘As I said with Father,’ I told him.

‘Not a little apprehensive, then, petal? All that responsibility to come?’

‘Mr Weatherall feels you too young to know your destiny,’ explained Mother.

‘Not at all, I look forward to finding what the future holds, monsieur,’ I replied.

He nodded, as if that was good enough for him.

‘And I like that I get to do more sword fighting, monsieur,’ I added. ‘With no secrecy now.’

‘Exactly! We shall work on your *riposte* and your *envelopment* and you may show off your skills to your father. I think he’ll be surprised, Élise, to discover what an accomplished swordswoman you already are. Perhaps one day you shall be better than either your mother or your father.’

‘Oh, I doubt that, monsieur.’

‘Freddie, please don’t put strange ideas into the girl’s head.’ Mother nudged me and whispered, ‘Though I think he may be right, Élise, just between you and me.’

Mr Weatherall became serious. ‘Now, are we going to talk about what went on yesterday?’

‘It was an attempt on our lives.

‘I only wish I had been there.’

‘No matter that you were not, Freddie. We remain unharmed and barely even traumatized by the incident. Élise acquitted herself perfectly, and …’

‘You were the lioness protecting her young, eh?’

‘I did what I had to do. It is a matter of regret that one of the men escaped.’

Mr Weatherall stopped. ‘*One* of the men? What? There were *more* than one?’

She looked at him meaningfully. ‘Oh yes. There was another man, the more dangerous of the two. He used a hidden blade.’

His mouth formed an O. ‘So it really was the work of Assassins?’

‘I have my doubts.’

‘Oh yes? Why?’

‘He ran, Freddie. Have you ever known an Assassin to run?’

‘They are merely human and you are a formidable opponent. I think I should have been tempted to run myself, in his shoes. You’re a right devil with that boot knife.’ He glanced back at me with a wink.

Mother glowed. ‘You may be assured your flattery does not go unappreciated, Freddie. But this man, there was something about him that wasn’t quite right. He was all … *show*. He was an Assassin, the hidden blade was proof of that. But, I wonder, was he a *true* Assassin?’

‘We need to find him, ask him.’

‘Indeed we do.’

‘Tell me, what did he look like?’

Mother gave him a description of the doctor.

‘… and there is something else.’

‘Yes?’

She led us to the hedges. Last night as we escaped the alley she had scooped up the doctor’s bag to take with us on the carriage ride home. Before arriving back at the chateau, she had me run and hide it, and she handed it to Mr Weatherall now.

‘He left this, did he?’

‘Indeed. He used it to carry a blade but there’s nothing else inside.’

‘Nothing to identify him?’

‘There is something … Open it. See the label inside?’

The bag was made in England,’ said Mr Weatherall, surprised. ‘An English Assassin?’

Mother nodded. ‘Possibly. Very possibly. Do you not think it plausible that the English might want me dead? I made it plain to Mrs Carroll that I favoured a change of monarchy.’

‘But also that you oppose bloodshed.’

‘Quite. And Mrs Carroll seemed to think that was enough for her Order. Perhaps not, though.’

Mr Weatherall shook his head. ‘I can’t see it myself. I mean, putting my own national loyalty to one side, I can’t see what’s in it for them. They see you as a moderating influence on the Order as a whole. Killing you risks destabilizing that.’

‘Perhaps it’s a risk they are willing to take. Either way an English-made doctor’s bag is the only clue we have as to the identity of the Assassin.’

Mr Weatherall nodded. ‘We will find him, madame,’ he told her. ‘You can be sure of that.’

That, of course, was three years ago. And of the doctor there has been no sight or sound since. The attempt on our lives has disappeared into history, like paupers swallowed up by the Paris fog.

13 April 1778

i.

I want her to get better. I want there to be a day when the sun shines and her maids enter to open her curtains only to find her sitting up in bed, ‘feeling quite revived’, and I want the sun that floods through her curtains to crowd its way into the hallways of our darkened home and chase away the grief-ridden shadows lurking there, touch Father, restore him and bring him back to me. I want to hear songs and laughter from the kitchen again. I want an end to this contained sadness and I want my smile to be real, no longer masking a hurt that churns inside.

And more than all of that I want my mother back. My mother, my teacher, my mentor. I don’t just want her, I need her. Every moment of every day I wonder what life would be like without her and have no idea, no conception.

I want her to get better.

ii.

And then, later that year, I met Arno.

Extract from the Journal of Arno Dorian

12 September 1794

Our relationship was forged in the fire of death – my father's death.

For how long did we have a normal, conventional relationship? Half an hour? I was at the Palace of Versailles with my father who had business there. He'd asked me to wait as he attended to what he had to do, and while I sat with my legs dangling, watching the highborn members of the court pass to and fro, who should appear but Élise de la Serre.

Her smile I would come to love, her red hair nothing special to me then, and the beauty over which my adult eyes would later linger was invisible to my young eyes. After all, I was only eight and eight-year-old boys, well, they don't have much time for eight-year-old girls, not unless that eight-year-old girl is something very special. And so it was with Élise. There was something *different* about her. She was a girl. But even in the first seconds of meeting her I knew she wasn't like any other girl I'd met before.

Chase me. Her favourite game. How many times did we play it as children and as adults. In a way we never stopped.

On the mirrored surfaces of the palace's marble floors we ran – through legs, along corridors, past columns and pillars. Even now the palace is huge to me, its ceilings impossibly tall, its halls stretching almost as far as the eye can see, huge arched windows looking out to the stone steps and sweeping grounds beyond.

But then? To me then it was exceptionally vast. And yet, even though it was this enormous, strange place, and even though with each step I took I went further away from my father's instructions, I still couldn't resist the lure of my new playmate. The girls I had met weren't like this. They stood with their heels together and their lips pursed in disdain at all things boy-like; they walked a few steps behind like Russian-doll versions of their mothers; they didn't run giggling through the halls of the Palace of Versailles, ignoring any protests that came their way, just running for the joy of running and the love of play. I wonder, had I already fallen in love?

And then, just as I started to worry that I would never find my way back to Father, my concerns became irrelevant. A shout had gone up. There was the sound of rushing feet. I saw soldiers with muskets and then, quite by chance,

came upon the spot where my father had met his killer and knelt to him as he breathed his last.

When at last I looked up from his lifeless body it was to see my saviour, my new guardian: François de la Serre.

Extracts from the Journal of Élise de la Serre

14 April 1778

i.

He came to see me today.

‘Élise, your father is here,’ said Ruth. Like everyone else her demeanour changed when my father was around, and she curtsied and withdrew, leaving us alone.

‘Hello, Élise,’ he said stiffly from the door. I remembered that evening years ago when Mother and I had returned from Paris, survivors of a terrible attack in an alleyway, and how he had been unable to stop taking us in his arms. He’d embraced me so much that by the end of the night I’d been wriggling away from him just to get some air. Now, as he stood there looking more like a governor than a father, I would have given anything for one of those embraces.

He turned and paced, hands clasped behind his back. He stopped, gazing from the window but not really seeing the lawns beyond, and I watched his blurred face in the reflection of the glass as without turning he said, ‘I wanted to see how you were.’

‘I’m fine, thank you, Papa.’

There was a pause. My fingers worked at the fabric of my smock. He cleared his throat. ‘You do a fine job of disguising your feelings, Élise; it is qualities such as these that you will one day call upon as Grand Master. Just as your strength comforts our household it will one day be of benefit to the Order.’

‘Yes, Father.’

Again he cleared his throat. ‘Even so, I want you to know that in private or when you and I should find ourselves alone, that … that it’s perfectly acceptable *not* to be fine.’

‘Then I will admit I am suffering, Father.’

His head dropped. His eyes were dark circles in the reflection of the glass. I knew why he found it difficult to look at me. It was because I reminded him of her. I reminded him of his dying wife.

‘I, too, am suffering, Élise. Your mother means the world to us both.’

(And if there was a moment in which he might have turned from the window, crossed the room, gathered me in his arms and allowed us to share our pain, then that was it. But he didn't.)

(And if there was a moment when I might have asked him why, if he knew my pain, he spent so much of his time with Arno and not with me, then that was it. But I didn't.)

Little else was said before he left. Some time later I heard that he had left to go hunting – with Arno.

The physician arrives soon. He never brings good news.

ii.

In my mind's eye I revisit another meeting, two years before, when I was summoned to Father's study for an audience with him and Mother, who unusually for her, wore a look of concern. I knew that there were serious matters they wanted to discuss when Olivier was asked to withdraw, the door closed and Father bid me take a seat.

'Your mother tells me that your training is progressing well, Élise,' he said.

I nodded enthusiastically, looking from one to the other. 'Yes, Father. Mr Weatherall says I'm going to be a bloody good sword fighter.'

Father looked taken aback. 'I see. One of Weatherall's British expressions, no doubt. Well, I'm pleased to hear it. Obviously you take after your mother.'

'You're no slouch with a blade yourself, François,' said Mother, with a hint of a smile.

'You've reminded me it's a while since we duelled.'

'I'll take that as a challenge, shall I?'

He looked at her and for a moment the serious business was forgotten. I was forgotten. For a second it was just Mother and Father in the room, being playful and flirting with one another.

And then, just as quickly as the moment had begun, it ended and the attention returned to me.

'You are well on your way to becoming a Templar, Élise.'

'When shall I be inducted, Papa?' I asked him.

'Your schooling will be finished at the Maison Royale in Saint-Cyr then you will become a fully fledged member of the Order and you will train to take my place.'

I nodded.

'First, though, there is something we have to tell you.' He looked at Mother, their faces serious now. 'It's about Arno …'

iii.

Arno was by then my best friend, and I suppose the person I loved the most after my parents. Poor Ruth. She'd had to abandon any lasting hope she might have had that I would settle down to girlhood and begin taking an interest in those same girly things adored by others my age. With Arno on the estate not only did I have a playmate whenever I wanted one, but a *boy* playmate. Her dreams lay in ruins.

I suppose, looking back, I had taken advantage of him rather. An orphan, he had come to us adrift, in need of direction, and I, of course, as much a fledgling Templar as a selfish little girl had made him 'mine'. We were friends, and of the same age, but even so my role was one of older sister, and it was a role I had taken to with great gusto. I loved besting him in pretend sword fights. During Mr Weatherall's training sessions I was a craven novice prone to mistakes and, as he was often pointing out, leading with my heart and not my head, but in play fights with Arno my novice skills made me a dazzling, spinning master. At other games – skipping, hopscotch, shuttlecock – we were evenly matched. But I always won at sword fighting.

When the weather was fine we roamed the grounds of the estate, spying on Laurent and other staff, skimming stones on the lake. When it rained we stayed indoors and played backgammon, marbles or jacks. We spun hoops through the great corridors of the ground floor and wandered the floors above, hiding from housemaids and running giggling when they shooed us away.

And that was how I spent my days: in the morning I was tutored, groomed for my adult life of leading the French Templars; the afternoon was when I let go of those responsibilities and instead of being an adult-in-waiting became a child again. Even then, though I never would have articulated it as such, I knew that Arno represented my escape.

And, of course, nobody had failed to notice how close Arno and I had become.

'Well, I've never seen you so happy,' said Ruth resignedly.

'You're certainly very fond of your new playmate, aren't you, Élise?' from my mother.

(Now – as I watch Arno sparring with my father in the yard and hear that they've gone hunting together – I wonder, was my mother just a tiny bit jealous that I had a significant other in my life? Now I know how she might have felt.)

Yet it had never occurred to me that my friendship with Arno might be a cause for concern. Not until that very moment when I stood before them in the chamber and they told me they had something to say about him.

iv.

‘Arno is of Assassin descent,’ said my father.

And a little bit of my world shook.

‘But …’ I began, and tried to reconcile two pictures in my mind. One of Arno in his shiny buckle shoes, waistcoat and jacket, running through the hallways of the chateau and steering his hoop with his stick. The other of the Assassin doctor in the alleyway, his hat tall in the fog.

‘Assassins are our enemy.’

Mother and Father shared a glance. ‘Their aims are opposed to ours, it’s true,’ he said.

My mind was racing. ‘But … but does this mean Arno will want to kill me?’

Mother moved forward to comfort me. ‘No, my dear, no, it doesn’t mean that at all. Arno is still your friend. Though his father, Charles Dorian, was an Assassin, Arno himself knew nothing of his destiny. No doubt he would have been told, in time; perhaps on his tenth birthday as we were planning to do with you. But as it stands he entered this house unaware of what the future had in store for him.’

‘He is not an Assassin then. Simply the son of an Assassin.’

Again they looked to one another. ‘He will have certain innate characteristics, Élise. In many ways Arno is, *was* and always will be an Assassin – it’s just that he doesn’t know it.’

‘But if he doesn’t know it then we shall never be enemies.’

‘That is quite correct,’ said Father. ‘In fact, we believe his nature might be overcome by nurture.’

‘François …’ said Mother warningly.

‘What do you mean, Father?’ I asked, my eyes darting from him to her, noting her discomfort.

‘I mean that you have a certain influence over him, do you not?’ asked Father.

I felt myself colouring. Was it so obvious?

‘Perhaps, Father …’

‘He looks up to you, Élise, and why not? It is gratifying to see. Most encouraging.’

‘François –’ Mother said again, but he stopped her with an appraised hand.

‘Please, my darling, leave this to me.’

I watched them carefully.

‘There is no reason why you, as Arno’s friend and playmate, can’t begin to educate him in our ways.’

‘Indoctrinate him, François?’ A flash of anger from my mother.

‘Guide him, my dear.’

‘Guide him in a manner that goes against his nature?’

‘How do we know? Perhaps Élise is right that he is not an Assassin until he’s made one. Perhaps we can save him from the clutches of his people.’

‘The Assassins don’t know he’s here?’ I asked.

‘We don’t believe so.’

‘Then there’s no reason he need be found out.’

‘That’s quite right, Élise.’

‘Then he needn’t be … anything.’

A look of confusion crossed my father’s face. ‘I’m sorry, my dear, I don’t quite follow.’

What I wanted to say was leave him out of this. Let Arno be for me, nothing to do with the way we see the world, the way we want to shape the world – let the bit of my life I share with Arno be free of all that.

‘I think,’ said Mother, ‘that what Elise is trying to say is –’ she spread her hands – ‘what’s the rush?’

He pursed his lips, not especially liking this wall of resistance thrown up by his womenfolk. ‘He is my ward. A child of this house. He will be brought up according to the doctrines of the house. To put it bluntly, we need to get to him before the Assassins do.’

‘We have no reason to fear that the Assassins will ever discover his existence,’ she pressed.

‘We cannot be sure. If the Assassins reach him they will bring him into the Order. He would not be able to resist.’

‘If he would not be able to resist, then how can it be right to steer him otherwise?’ I pleaded, though my reasons for doing so were more personal than ideological. ‘How can it be right for us to go against what fate has in store for him?’

He fixed me with a hard look. ‘Do you want Arno to be your enemy?’

‘No,’ I said, impassioned.

‘Then the best way to be sure of that is to bring him round to our way of thinking –’

‘Yes, François, but not now,’ interrupted Mother. ‘Not just yet? Not when the children are so young.’

He looked from one protesting face to the other and appeared to soften. ‘You two,’ he said with a smile. ‘Very well. Do as you wish for the time being. We shall review the situation later.’

I shot a grateful look at my mother.

What will I do without her?

v.

She fell ill soon after that, and was confined to her rooms, which stayed darkened day and night, that part of the house out of bounds to all but her lady's maid, Justine, my father and me, and three nurses who were hired to look after her, who were all called Marie.

To the rest of the house, she began to cease to exist. Though my morning routine stayed the same, I was with my governor and then in the woods at the edge of our grounds, learning swording with Mr Weatherall. I no longer whiled afternoons away with Arno; instead I spent them at my mother's bedside, clasping her hand as the Maries fussed around us.

I watched as Arno began to gravitate towards my father. I watched my father find comfort away from the stress of Mother's illness in being his guardian. My father and I were both trying to cope with the gradual loss of Mother, both finding different ways to do it. The laughter in my life faded away.

vi.

I used to have a dream. Only it wasn't a dream because I was awake. I suppose you'd have to say it was a fantasy. In the fantasy I was sitting on a throne. I know how it may sound, but after all, if you can't admit it to your journal when can you admit it? I am sitting on a throne before my subjects who in the daydream have no identity but who I suppose must be Templars. They are assembled before me, the Grand Master. And you know it's not a particularly serious daydream because I'm sitting before them as a ten-year-old girl, the throne way too big for me, my legs sticking out, my arms not even long enough to reach over the arms of the chair. I am the least monarch-like monarch you can possibly imagine, but it's a daydream and that's the way daydreams go sometimes. What's important about this daydream isn't that I turn myself into a king, nor that I have brought my ascendance to Grand Master forward by decades. What's significant about it for me, and what I cling to, is that sitting at either side of me are my mother and father.

Each day that she grows a little weaker and closer to death, and each day that he gravitates closer towards Arno, the impression of them at my side becomes more and more indistinct.

15 April 1778

‘There’s something I have to tell you, Élise, before I go.’

She took my hand and her grip was so frail. My shoulders shook as I began to sob. ‘No, please, Mother, no …’

‘Hush, child, be strong. Be strong for me. I am being taken from you and you must see that as a test of your strength. You must be strong, not only for yourself, but also for your father. My passing makes him vulnerable to the raised voices of the Order. You must be a voice in his other ear, Élise. You must press for the third way.’

‘I can’t.’

‘You can. And one day you will be the Grand Master, and you must lead the Order, abiding by your own principles. The principles in which you believe.’

‘They are yours, Mother.’

She dropped my hand and reached to stroke my cheek. Her eyes were cloudy and the smile floated on her face. ‘They are principles founded on compassion, Élise, and you have so much of that. So much of it. You know, I’m so proud of you. I couldn’t have hoped for a more wonderful daughter. In you, I see the best of your father and the best of me. I couldn’t have asked for more, Élise, and I will die happy – happy to have known you and honoured to have witnessed the birth of your greatness.’

‘No, Mother, please, no.’

The words were spoken between sobs that wracked my body. My hands gripped her upper arm through the sheets. Her so-thin upper arm through the sheets. As though by holding it I might prevent her soul departing.

Her red hair was spread across the pillow. Her eyes fluttered. ‘Please call your father, if you would,’ she said in a voice that was too weak and too soft, as though the life were slipping out of her. I rushed to the door, flung it open, called for one of the Maries to fetch Father, slammed the door shut again and returned to her side, but it was as though the end was coming quickly now, and as death settled over her she looked at me with watering eyes and the fondest smile I have ever seen.

‘Please look after each other,’ she said. ‘I love you both so very much.’

18 April 1778

i.

And I have frozen. I wander rooms, breathing the fusty smell I had come to associate with her illness, and know that we will have to open the curtains and fresh air will banish the scent, but not wanting that because it will mean she has gone, and I can't accept that.

When she was ill I wanted her back to full health. Now she is dead I just want her here. I just want her in the house.

This morning I watched from my window as three carriages arrived on the gravel outside and valets lowered steps and began to load them with trunks. Shortly afterwards the three Maries appeared and began giving each other kisses goodbye. They wore black and dabbed their eyes and of course they grieved for Mother but it was a temporary grief by necessity, because their work here was over, payment made, and they would go to tend to other dying women and feel the same passing sadness when that next appointment came to an end.

I tried not to think of their departure as being in indecent haste. I tried not to resent them leaving me alone with my grief. They were hardly alone in not knowing the depth of my feeling. Mother had made Father promise not to observe the usual mourning rituals, and so the curtains of the lower floors stayed open and nor was the furniture cloaked in black. There were newer members of staff who had known only Mother briefly, or never met her at all. The mother I remembered was beautiful and graceful and protective, but to them she was remote. She wasn't really a person. She was a weak lady in bed, and a lot of households had one of those. Even more than the Maries, their mourning was nothing more than a brief pang of sadness.

And so the household carried on almost as though nothing had happened, just a few of us truly grieving, the few who had known and loved Mother as she was. When I caught Justine's eye I could see in her a reflection of my own deep pain. She had been the only member of staff allowed in Mother's rooms during the sickness.

‘Oh, mademoiselle’ she said, and as her shoulders began to heave I took her hand and thanked her for everything she’d done, assuring her that Mother had been so grateful for her care. She curtsied, thanked me for my comfort and left.

We were like two survivors of a great battle sharing memories with our eyes. She, Father and I were the only three remaining in the chateau who had tended to Mother as she died.

It has been two days now and though Father had held me at her bedside on the night of her passing I haven’t seen him since. Ruth tells me that he has remained in his rooms weeping, but that very soon he will find the strength to emerge and that I shouldn’t worry for him; I should think of myself. She clasped me to her, pulling me into her bosom and rubbing my back as though trying to wind me.

‘Let it out, child,’ she whispered. ‘Don’t keep it all inside.’

But I wriggled away, thanking her, telling her that will be all – a bit haughty, the way I imagine May Carroll speaks to her maid.

There’s nothing to let out is the problem. I feel nothing.

Unable to stand the upper floors any longer, I left to wander the chateau, passing through the hallways like a ghost.

‘Élise …’ Arno lurked at one end of a hallway with his hat held in his hand and his cheeks red as though having just been running. ‘I’m sorry to hear about your mother, Élise.’

‘Thank you, Arno,’ I said. The corridor seemed too long between us. He was hopping from one foot to another. ‘It was expected, not at all a shock, and though of course I’m grieving, I’m grateful I was able to be with her until the end.’

He nodded sympathetically, not really understanding, and I could see why because everything in his world remained unchanged. To him a lady he barely knew, who had lived in a part of the house he wasn’t allowed to visit, had died, and that made people that he cared for sad. But that was it.

‘Perhaps we could play later,’ I said. ‘After our lessons.’ And he brightened.

He was probably missing Father, I reasoned, watching him go.

ii.

I spent the morning with the governor and met Arno again at the door as he entered to begin his own lessons. Our timetables were ordered so that Arno should be with the governor while I trained with Mr Weatherall, so that he would never see me swording. (Perhaps in his own journal one day he will talk of signposts towards the moment when the penny dropped. ‘It never occurred to me to question why she was so adept at sword fighting …’). And then I left by a rear

door and walked along the line of topiary until I came to the woodland at the bottom and took the path to where Mr Weatherall sat on a stump waiting for me. He used to sit with his legs crossed and the tails of his jacket arranged over the stump, cutting quite a dash, but whereas before he had bounded from it to greet me, the light dancing in his eyes, a smile never far from his lips, now his head was bowed as though he had the weight of the world on his shoulders. Beside him on the seat was a box about a foot and a half long and a hand wide.

'You have been told,' I said.

His eyes were heavy. His bottom lip trembled a little and for a horrible moment I wondered what I would do if Mr Weatherall were to cry.

'How are you taking it?'

'It was expected,' I said. 'Not at all a shock, and though of course I'm grieving, I'm grateful I was able to be with her until the end.'

He handed me the box. 'It's with a heavy heart I give you this, Élise.' His voice was gruff. 'She hoped to give it to you herself.'

I took the box, and weighed the dark wood in my hands, knowing already what was inside. Sure enough a short sword lay within. Its sheath was soft brown leather with white stitching along the sides, and the belt a leather strap designed for tying at the waist. The blade of the sword took the light, the steel was new, its handle bound tight with stained leather. There by the hilt was an inscription. 'May the father of understanding be your guide. Love, Mother.'

'It was always to have been your going-away present, Élise,' he said flatly, glancing away into the woods and discreetly pushing the ball of his thumb into his eyes. 'You're to use it for practice.'

'Thank you,' I told him and he shrugged. I wished I could move forward to a time when the sword thrilled me. For now I felt nothing.

There was a long pause. There wasn't going to be any training today, I realized. Neither of us had the heart for it.

After a while he said, 'Did she say anything of me? At the end, I mean.'

I only just managed to hide my startled look, seeing something in his eyes I recognized as a cross between desperation and hope. I'd known his feeling for her was strong, but until that moment I hadn't realized quite how strong.

'She asked me to tell you that in her heart was love for you, and that she was eternally grateful for everything you had done for her.'

He nodded. 'Thank you, Élise, that's a great comfort,' he said, and turning, wiped tears from his eyes.

Later, I was summoned to see Father and the two of us sat on a chaise longue in his darkened study, he with his arms round me, holding me tight. He had shaved, and outwardly was the same as he always was, but his words emerged slow and forced and brandy clouded his breath.

‘I can tell you’re being strong, Élise,’ he said, ‘stronger than I am.’

Inside us both was a hollow ache. I found myself almost envying his ability to touch the source of his pain.

‘It was expected –’ I said, but was unable to finish because my shoulders shook, and I gripped him with hands that trembled, allowing myself to be enveloped by him.

‘Let it out, Élise,’ he said, and began to stroke my hair.

And I did. I let it out. And at last I began to cry.

Extract from the Journal of Arno Dorian

12 September 1794

Guilt-stricken, I laid down her journal, overwhelmed by the pain that poured off the page. Horribly aware of my own contribution to her misery.

Élise is right. The madame's death hardly even gave me pause for thought. To the selfish young boy I was, it was just something that prevented François and Élise from playing with me. An inconvenience that meant that until things returned to normal – and Élise was right, because of the house opting not to mourn, things did seem to get back to normal quickly – I had to make my own entertainment.

That, to my shame, is all the Madame's death meant to me.

But I was only a little boy, just ten.

Ah, but so was Élise, just ten. And yet so far ahead of me in intelligence. She writes of our time with the governor, but how he must have groaned when it was my turn to be taught. He must have packed away Élise's textbooks and reached for my more elementary versions with a heavy heart.

And yet, in growing so quickly – and, as I now realize, in being groomed to grow so quickly – Élise was forced to live with a burden. Or so it seems to me reading these pages. The little girl I knew was just a little girl, full of fun and mischief and, yes, like a sister, inventing all the best games, being handy with the excuses when we were caught out of bounds or stealing food from the kitchen or in doing whatever other japes she had planned for the day.

Little wonder then that when Élise was sent to the Maison Royale de Saint-Louis school at Saint-Cyr in order to complete her education she ran into trouble. Neither of those two opposing sides of her personality were suitable for school life and, predictably, she hated the Maison Royale. Hated it. Though it was just under twenty miles away from Versailles, she might as well have been in a different country for all the distance she felt between her new life and her old. In her letters she referred to it as *Le Palais de la Misère*. Visits home were restricted to three weeks in the summer and a few days at Christmas, while the rest of her year was spent submitting to the regimes of the Maison Royale. Élise was not one for regimes. Not unless they suited her. The regime of learning sword with Mr Weatherall was a very 'Élise' kind of regime; the regime of

school, on the other hand, was a very ‘not Élise’ kind of regime. She hated the restrictions of school life. She hated having to learn ‘accomplishments’, such as embroidery and music. So in her journal there is entry after entry of Élise in trouble at school. The entries themselves become repetitive. Years and years of unhappiness and frustration.

The way things worked at the school was that the girls were split into groups, each with a head pupil. Of course Élise had clashed with the head of her group, Valerie, and the two had fought. They *literally* fought. At times, I read with a hand to my mouth, not sure whether to laugh at Élise’s daring or be shocked by it.

Time and time again, Élise was brought before the hated headmistress, Madame Levene, asked to explain herself, then punished.

And time and time again she would respond with insolence and her insolence would make the situation worse and the severity of the punishments was increased. And the more the punishments were increased the more rebellious Élise became, and the more rebellious Élise became the more she was brought before the headmistress, and the more insolent she was and the more the punishments were increased …

I’d known she was often in trouble, of course, because although we rarely saw each other during this period – snatched glimpses through the windows of the tutor’s window during her all-too-brief holidays, the odd regretful wave – we corresponded regularly. I, an orphan, had never been sent letters before, and the novelty of receiving them from Élise never faded. And of course she wrote of her hatred for school, but the correspondence lacked the detail of her journal, from which pulsed the scorn and contempt she felt for other pupils, for the teachers and for Madame Levene. Even a huge fireworks display to celebrate the school’s centenary in 1786 could do nothing to lift her spirits. The king had apparently stood on the terraces at Versailles to enjoy the huge display, but even so it was not enough to cheer Élise. Instead her journal was filled with a sense of injustice and of Élise at odds with the world around her – page after page, and year after year, of my love failing to see the vicious circle into which she was locked. Page after page of her failing to realize that what she was doing wasn’t rebelling. It was mourning.

And reading on, I began discover that there was something else she had withheld from me …

Extracts from the Journal of Élise de la Serre

8 September 1787

My father came to see me today. I was called to Madame Levene's office for an audience with him and had been looking forward to seeing him, but of course the witchy old headmistress remained in the room cackling, such were the rules of *Le Palais de la Misère*, and so the visit was conducted as though for an audience. With the window behind her offering a sweeping view of the school grounds, which even I had to admit was stunning, she sat with her hands clasped on the desk in front of her, watching with a thin smile as Father and I sat in chairs on the other side of the desk, the awkward father and his trouble-making daughter.

'I had rather hoped the path to complete your education would be a graceful canter rather than a limp, Élise,' he said with a sigh.

He looked old and tired, and I could imagine the chattering Crows at his shoulder, constantly badgering him, *do this, do that*, while to add to his woe his errant daughter was the subject of irate letters home, Madame Levene detailing my shortcomings at great length.

'For France, life continues to be hard, Élise,' he explained. 'Two years ago there was a drought and the worst harvest anyone can remember. The king authorized the building of a wall around Paris. He has tried to increase taxes but the *parlement* in Paris supported the nobles who defied him. Our stout and resolute king panicked, withdrew the taxes, and there were demonstrations of celebration. Soldiers ordered to fire into the demonstrators refused to do so …'

'The nobles defied the king?' I said with a raised eyebrow.

He nodded. 'Indeed. Who would've thought it? Perhaps they hope that the man on the street will be grateful, pass a vote of thanks and return home.'

'You don't think so?'

'I fear not, Élise. I fear that once the working man has the bit between his teeth, once he has a taste for the power – the potential power of the mob – then he will not be content merely with the withdrawal of some new tax laws. I think we may find a lifetime of frustration flooding out of these people, Élise. When they threw fireworks and stones at the Palais de Justice I don't think they were supporting noblemen. And when they burned effigies of the Vicomte de Calonne I don't think they were supporting noblemen either.'

‘They burned effigies? Of the Controller-General of Finances?’

Father nodded. ‘Indeed they did. He has been forced to leave the country. Other ministers have followed. There will be unrest, Élise, you mark my words.’

I said nothing.

‘Which brings us to the matter of your behaviour here at school,’ he said. ‘You’re a senior now. A lady. And you should be behaving like one.’

I thought about that, and how wearing the seniors’ uniform of the Maison Royale didn’t make me feel like a woman. All it did was make me feel like a pretend-lady. I felt like a real woman after school when I discarded the hated bone-stiff dress, unpinned my hair and let it drop to where it met my newly acquired bosom. When I gazed into the looking glass and saw my mother staring back at me.

‘You’re writing to Arno,’ he said, as though wanting to try a different approach.

‘You’re not reading my letters, are you?’

He rolled his eyes. ‘No, Élise, I am not reading your letters. For God’s sake, what do you think of me?’

My own eyes dropped. ‘I’m sorry, Father.’

‘So busy rebelling against any available authority you’ve forgotten your true friends, is that it?’

At her desk Madame Levene was nodding sagely, feeling vindicated.

‘I’m sorry, Father,’ I repeated, ignoring her.

‘The fact remains that you have been writing to Arno and – going purely on what he has told me – you have done nothing to fulfil the terms of our agreement.’

He cast a significant look towards the headmistress, eyebrows ever so slightly raised.

‘What agreement would that be, Father?’ I asked innocently, the devil in me.

With another brief nod in the direction of our audience, he added meaningfully, ‘The *agreement* we made before you left for Saint-Cyr, Élise, when you assured me you would be doing your utmost to convince Arno of his suitability for *adoption* into our family.’

‘I’m sorry, Father, I’m still not quite sure what you mean.’

His brow darkened. Then with a deep breath he turned to the headmistress. ‘I wonder, madame, if I might speak to my daughter alone.’

‘I’m afraid that runs contrary to the policies of the academy, monsieur,’ she said, smiling sweetly. ‘Parents or guardians needing to see pupils in private must provide a request in writing.’

‘I know, but …’

‘I’m sorry, monsieur,’ she insisted.

He drummed his fingers on the leg of his breeches. ‘Élise, please don’t be difficult. You know exactly what I mean. Before you came away to school we agreed that the time was right to *adopt* Arno into our *family*.’ He gave me a meaningful look.

‘But he is a member of another family,’ I said, as though butter wouldn’t melt in my mouth.

‘Please do not play games with me, Élise.’

Madame Levene gave a harrumph. ‘We are well used to that at the Maison Royale, monsieur.’

‘Thank you, Madame Levene,’ said Father irritably. But when he returned his attention to me our eyes met, and some of the frostiness between us evaporated in the face of Madame Levene’s unwelcome presence, the corners of his mouth even twitching as he suppressed a smile. In response I gave him my most beatific, innocent look. His eyes grew affectionate as we shared the moment.

He was more measured when he spoke. ‘Élise, I’m quite certain that I don’t need to remind you of the terms of our agreement. Simply to say that if you continue to fail to abide by them, then I shall have to take matters into my own hands.’

We both stole a look at Madame Levene, who sat with her hands clasped on the desk in front of her, trying her level best not to look confused but failing miserably. It was the moment I came closest to simply bursting out laughing.

‘You mean you will attempt to persuade him of his suitability, Father?’

He became serious, catching me in his gaze. ‘I will.’

‘Even though by doing that, you would lose me Arno’s trust?’

‘It’s a risk I would have to take, Élise,’ replied Father. ‘Unless you do as you have agreed to do.’

And what I had agreed to do was indoctrinate Arno. Bring him into the fold. My heart grew heavy at the thought – the thought of somehow *losing* Arno. Yet it was do that or have Father do it himself. I imagined Arno, furious, confronting me at some unspecified point in the future – ‘*Why did you never tell me?’* – and couldn’t bear the thought.

‘I will do as we agreed, Father.’

‘Thank you.’

We turned our attention to Madame Levene, who scowled at Father.

‘And make sure your behaviour improves,’ he added quickly, before slapping his hand to his thighs, which I knew from years of experience meant that our meeting was over.

The headmistress’s scowl deepened as, instead of admonishing me further, Father stood and gathered me in his arms, almost surprising me with the force of his emotion.

There and then I decided that, for him, I would improve. I would do right by him. Be the daughter he deserved.

8 January 1788

When I look back to the diary entry of 8 September 1787 it's to wince with shame at having written, 'I would do right by him. Be the daughter he deserved', only to do …

… absolutely nothing of the sort.

Not only had I neglected to persuade Arno of the joys of converting to the Templar cause (a situation at least partly informed by me disloyally wondering if in fact there *were* any joys in converting to the Templar cause), my behaviour at the Maison Royale had failed to improve.

It had really failed to improve.

It had got a lot worse.

Why, only yesterday Madame Levene called me into her office, the third time in as many weeks. How many times had I made the trip across the years? Hundreds? For insolence, fighting, sneaking out at night (oh, how I loved to sneak out at night, just me and the dew), for drinking, for being disruptive, for scruffiness, or for my particular favourite, 'persistent bad behaviour'.

There was nobody who knew the route to Madame Levene's office as well as I did. There can't have been a beggar alive who had held out their palm more than I had. And I had learnt to anticipate the swish of the cane. Even welcome it. Not to blink when the cane left its brand upon my skin.

It was just as I expected this time, more repercussions from a fight with Valerie who as well as being our group leader was also the star drama pupil when it came to productions by Racine and Corneille. Take my advice, dear reader, and never pick an actress as an adversary. They are so terribly dramatic about everything. Or, as Mr Weatherall would say, 'Such bloody drama queens!'

True, this particular disagreement had ended with Valerie in receipt of a black eye and a nosebleed. It had happened while I was supposedly on probation for an act of minor revolt at dinner the month before, which is nothing worth going into here. The point was that the headmistress claimed to be at the end of her tether. She had had 'quite enough of you, Élise de la Serre. Quite enough, young lady.'

And there was, of course, the usual talk of expulsion. Except, this time, I was pretty sure it was more than just talk. I was pretty sure that when Madame

Levene told me she planned to send a strongly worded letter home requesting my father's attention at once in order that my future at the Maison Royale should be discussed, this was no longer the latest in a series of idle threats and that her mind was indeed at the end of its tether.

But still I didn't care.

No, I mean, I *don't* care. Do your worst, Levene; do your worst, Father. There's no circle of hell to which you can consign me worse than the one in which I already find myself.

'I have been sent a letter from Versailles,' she said. 'Your father is sending an emissary to deal with you.'

I had been gazing out of the window, my eyes travelling past the walls of the Maison Royale to the outside where I longed to be. Now, however, I switched to looking at Madame Levene, her pinched pruny face, her eyes like stones behind her spectacles. 'An emissary?'

'Yes. And from what I read in the letter this emissary has been given the task of *beating* some sense into you.'

I thought to myself, *An emissary? My father was sending an emissary. He wasn't even coming himself*. Perhaps he planned to isolate me, I thought, suddenly realizing how horrific I found the idea. My father, one of only three people in the world I truly loved and trusted, simply shutting me out. I'd been wrong. There was another circle of hell into which I could be cast.

Madame Levene gloated. 'Yes. It appears that your father is too busy to attend to this matter himself. He must send an emissary in his place. Perhaps, Élise, you are not as important to him as you might imagine.'

I looked hard at the headmistress and for a brief second imagined myself diving across the desk and wiping the smirk off her face, but I was already fermenting other plans.

'The emissary wishes to see you alone,' she said, and we both knew the significance of that fact. It meant I was to be punished. As in, physically punished.

'I expect you shall listen outside the door.'

Her lips thinned. Those stony eyes glittered. 'I will enjoy knowing that your impertinence has come with a price, Mademoiselle de la Serre, you can be sure of that.'

21 January 1788

And so the day came when the emissary was due to arrive. I had stayed out of trouble the week prior to his arrival. According to the other girls I was quieter than usual. Some were asking when the ‘old Élise’ would return; the usual suspects were crowing that I had finally been tamed. We’d see.

Actually what I was doing was readying myself, mentally and physically. The emissary would be expecting meek acquiescence. He would be expecting a frightened teenager, terrified of expulsion and happy to take any other punishment. The emissary would be expecting tears and contrition. He wasn’t going to get that.

I was summoned to the office, told to wait, and wait I did. With my hands grasping my purse in which I had secreted a horseshoe ‘borrowed’ from above the dormitory door. It had never brought me any luck. Now was its chance.

From the vestibule outside I heard two voices, Madame Levene with her obsequious, ingratiating welcome to father’s emissary, telling him that ‘the miscreant awaits her chastisements in my office, monsieur,’ and then the deeper, growling voice of the emissary as he replied, ‘Thank, you, madame.’

With a gasp I recognized the voice, and still had my hand to my mouth in shock as the door opened and in came Mr Weatherall.

He closed the door behind him and I threw myself at him, knocking the breath out of him with the force of my emotion, shoulders wracked with sobs that came before I had a chance to stop them. My shoulders heaved as I wept into his chest and I tell you this – I’ve never ever been as pleased see anyone in my life as I was at that moment.

We stayed like that for some time, with me silently sobbing into my protector until at last I was able to gain control of myself. And then he held me at arm’s length to gaze into my eyes and, first putting his finger to his lips, unbuttoned his jacket, took it off and hung it on the hook behind the door so that it obscured the keyhole.

Over his shoulder he said loudly, ‘You may well cry, mademoiselle, for your father is too furious with you to attend to the matter himself. So full of emotion that he has asked me, your governor –’ he winked – ‘to administer your

punishment in his place. But first, you shall write to him a letter of abject apology. And when that is done I shall administer your punishment, which you may expect to be most severe you have ever experienced.'

He ushered me to a school desk in one corner of the office where I perched with writing paper, quill and pen just in case the headmistress should find an excuse to walk in on us. Then he pulled up a chair, put his elbows to the surface of the desk and, whispering, we began to talk.

'I'm pleased to see you,' I told him.

He chortled softly. 'Can't say I'm surprised. After all, you were expecting to have seven shades of shit knocked out of you.'

'Actually,' I said, opening my purse to reveal the horseshoe inside, 'it was the other way around.'

He frowned. Not the reaction I wanted. 'And what then, Élise?' he whispered crossly, his forefinger jabbing the desktop for emphasis. 'You would have been expelled from the Maison Royale. Your education – delayed. Your induction – delayed. Your ascendance to Grand Master – delayed. Exactly what would that path have achieved, eh?'

'I really don't care,' I said.

'You don't care, eh? You don't care about your father any more?'

'You know damn well I care about Father.'

He sneered at my cursing. 'And I know damn well you care about your mother, too. And the family name come to that. So why are you so intent on dragging it through the mud? Why are you seeing to it that you never get as far as Grand Master?'

'It is my *destiny* to be Grand Master,' I replied, realizing with an uncomfortable twinge that I reminded myself of May Carroll.

'A destiny can change, child.'

'I'm not a child any more,' I reminded him. 'I am twenty years old.'

His expression saddened. 'You'll always be a child to me, Élise. Don't forget I can remember the little girl learning sword in the woods. Most able pupil I ever had, but also the most impulsive. Bit too full of herself.' He looked sideways at me. 'You been keeping up your swording?'

I scoffed. 'In here? How would I manage that?'

Sarcastically, he pretended to think. 'Oh, let's see. Um, how about by keeping a low profile so your every move wasn't watched? So you could sneak away every now and then, instead of always being the centre of attention. The sword given to you by your mother was for exactly that purpose.'

I felt guilty. 'Well, no. As you know I haven't been doing that.'

'And so your skills have been neglected.'

‘Then why send me away to a school where that was bound to happen?’

‘Point is, it wasn’t *bound* to happen. You shouldn’t have let it happen. You’re to be a Grand Master.’

‘Well, that could change, according to you,’ I retorted, feeling like I’d won the point.

He didn’t miss a beat. ‘And it *will* change if you don’t knuckle down and mend your ways. Them lot you call the Crows – Messieurs Lafrenière, Le Peletier and Sivert, and Madame Levesque – are just dying to see you slip up. You think it’s all cosy in the Order, do you? That they’re all strewing flowers ahead of your coronation as their “rightful queen”, like in the history books? Nothing could be further from the truth. Every single one of them would like to end the reign of La Serre and make it so their family name carries the title Grand Master. Every single one of them is looking for reasons to depose your father and snatch the title for themselves. Their policies differ to those of your father, remember? He hangs on to their confidence by a thread. Having an errant daughter is the last thing he bloody needs. Besides …’

‘What?’

He glanced to the door. No doubt Madame Levene had her ear pressed hard against it, and it was for her benefit that Mr Weatherall said loudly, ‘and just you make sure you use your very best handwriting, mademoiselle.’

Quietening, he leaned closer towards me. ‘You remember the two men who attacked you, no doubt?’

‘How could I forget?’

‘Well,’ continued Mr Weatherall, ‘I promised your mother I’d find the fella who wore the doctor get-up, and I think I have.’

I gave him a look.

‘Yes, all right,’ he admitted, ‘so it’s taken me a while. But I’ve found him, that’s the important thing.’

Faces so close they were almost touching. I could smell wine on his breath.

‘Who is he?’ I asked.

‘His name is Ruddock, and he is indeed an Assassin, or *was*, at least.’

He went on. ‘Seems that he was excommunicated from the Order. Been trying to get back in ever since.’

‘Why was he excommunicated?’

‘Bringing the Order into disrepute. Likes a wager by the sounds of things. Only he’s not the lucky sort. He’s up to his eyes in debt by all accounts.’

‘Could it be he hoped to kill Mother as a means of gaining favour with his Order?’

Mr Weatherall shot me an impressed look. ‘Could well be the case, though I can’t help but think it’d be a bit of boneheaded strategy for him. Could be that killing your mother would have brought him even greater disgrace. He’d have no way of knowing.’ He shook his head. ‘Wait to see if the assassination is viewed in a favourable light and then claim credit for it, maybe. But no, I can’t see it. To me this sounds as though he was offering his services to the highest bidder, trying to clear those gambling debts. I reckon our friend Ruddock was working freelance.’

‘So the Assassins were not the ones behind the attempt?’

‘Not necessarily.’

‘Have you told the Crows?’

He shook his head.

‘Why not?’

He looked cagey. ‘Your mother had certain … *suspicions* concerning the Crows.’

‘What sort of suspicions?’

‘Do you remember a certain François Thomas Germain?’

‘I’m not sure I do.’

‘Fierce-looking bloke. He would have been around when you were knee-high to a grasshopper.’

‘Knee-high to a what?’

‘Never mind. But this François Thomas Germain was your father’s lieutenant. He had some dodgy ideas and your father turfed him out of the Order. He’s dead now. But your mother always wondered if the Crows might have had sympathies with him.’

I started, unable to believe what I was hearing. ‘You can’t believe my father’s advisors would plot to kill Mother?’

True, I’d always hated the Crows, but then again I’d always hated Madame Levene and I couldn’t imagine her plotting my murder. The idea was too far-fetched.

Mr Weatherall continued. ‘Your mother’s death would have suited their ends. The Crows may well have been your father’s advisors in name, but after Germain got the boot it was your mother who had his ear above all others, including them. With her out of the way –’

‘But she is “out of the way”. She’s dead, and my father has remained true to his principles.’

‘It’s impossible to say what goes on, Élise. Maybe he’s proved less pliable than expected.’

‘No, it still doesn’t make sense to me,’ I said, shaking my head.

‘Things don’t always make sense, love. The Assassins trying to kill your mother didn’t make sense, but everyone was keen to believe it. No, for the time being I’m staying suspicious unless I have evidence otherwise, and if it’s all the same to you, I’m playing it safe until we know either way.’

Inside me was a strangely hollow feeling, a sense that a curtain had been drawn back to expose uncertainties. There might be people within our own organization who wished us ill. I had to find out – I had to find out either way.

‘What about Father?’

‘What of him?’

You haven’t told him your suspicions?’

With his eyes fixed on the desktop, he shook his head.

‘Why?’

‘Well, firstly, because they are just suspicions, and, as you’ve pointed out, pretty wild ones at that. If they’re not true – which they’re most likely not – I look like a bloody idiot; if they are, then all I’ve done is alerted them, and while they’re busy laughing it off because I don’t have a shred of proof, they’re making plans to do away with me. And also …’

‘What?’

‘I have not been acquitting myself well since your mother died, Élise,’ he admitted. ‘Reverting to old ways, you might say, and in the process burning what bridges I had built with my fellow Templars. There are some similarities between myself and Mr Ruddock.’

‘I see. And that’s why I can smell wine on your breath, is it?’

‘We all cope in our own way, child.’

‘She’s been gone almost ten years, Mr Weatherall.’

He gave a short mirthless laugh. ‘Mourn too much for your tastes, do I? Well, I could say the same of you, pissing away the last of your education, making enemies when you should be forging connections and contacts. Don’t you be sneering at the likes of me, Élise. Not until your own house is in order.’

I frowned. ‘We need to know who was behind that attempt.’

‘Which is what I’m doing,’

‘How?’

‘This bloke Ruddock is hiding out in London. We have contacts there. The Carrolls, if you recall. I’ve already sent word ahead of my arrival.’

Never was I more certain of anything. ‘I’m coming with you.’

He looked at me peevishly. ‘No, you’re bloody well not, you’re staying here and finishing your schooling. For crying out loud, girl, what on earth would your father say?’

‘How about we tell him I’m to pay an educational visit to London in order to improve my English?’

My protector jabbed his finger on the desk. ‘No. How about we do nothing of the sort? How about you stay here?’

I shook my head. ‘No, I’m coming with you. This man has haunted my nightmares for years, Mr Weatherall.’ I fixed him with my best imploring look. ‘I have some ghosts I need to lay to rest.’

He rolled his eyes. ‘Pull the other one. You forget how well I know you. More likely you want the excitement, and you want to get away from this place.’

‘Well, all right,’ I said, ‘but come on, Mr Weatherall. Do you know how difficult it is to have the likes of Valerie sneering at me, and not tell them that one day, when she’s pushing out children for the drunken son of a marquis, I will be head of the Templars? This stage of my life cannot end soon enough for me. I’m desperate for the next stage to start.’

‘You’ll just have to wait.’

‘I’ve only got a year to go,’ I pushed.

‘They call it finishing for a reason. You can’t finish unless you finish.’

‘I won’t even be away that long.’

‘No. And anyway, even – *even* – if I agreed, you’d never get her out there to say yes.’

‘We could forge letters,’ I insisted. ‘Anything she writes to Father, you could intercept. I take it you *have* been intercepting the letters …?’

‘Of course I have. Why do you think I’m here and not him? But he’s going to find out sooner or later. At some point, Élise, one way or another, your lies will be exposed.’

‘It’ll be too late then.’

He bulged with fresh anger, his skin reddening against the white of his whiskers. ‘This – this is exactly what I’m talking about. You’re so full of yourself you’ve forgotten your responsibilities. It’s making you reckless, and the more reckless you are the more you endanger your family’s position. I wish I’d never bloody told you now. I thought I could talk some sense into you.’

I looked at him, an idea forming, and then in a display of acting that would have impressed Valerie, pretended to decide he was right and that I was sorry and all the other stuff he wanted to see in my face.

He nodded and then cast his voice towards the door. ‘Right, at last, you’re finished. This letter I shall take home to your father, accompanied by the news that I gave you six strokes of the cane.’

I shook my head and held up desperate fingers.

He blanched. ‘What I mean is, *twelve* strokes of the cane.’

I shook my head furiously. Held out fingers again.

‘I mean ten strokes of the cane.’

Pretend-wiping my brow, I called out, ‘Oh no, monsieur, not ten strokes.’

‘Now, is this the cane used to punish you girls?’

He had moved over to Madame Levene’s desk, which was in sight of the keyhole, and picked up the cane from its pride of place on the top. At the same time he used the cover of his back and sleight of hand to pluck a cushion from her chair and skim it across the floor to me.

It was all very smooth. Like we did it every day. What a team we made. I picked up the cushion and laid it across the desk as he walked over with a cane, and once more we were out of sight of the keyhole.

‘Right,’ he said loudly for the benefit of Madame Levene, with a wink at me. I stood to one side while he gave the cushion ten smart whacks, making suitable ouch noises after each one. And after all, when it came to authentic pain noises, who knew better than I? I could imagine Madame Levene cursing as all the action happened out of sight, no doubt planning to rearrange the furniture as soon as possible.

When it was over and I’d summoned thoughts of Mother to make myself cry, and we’d replaced the cushion and the cane, we opened the door. Madame Levene was standing in the vestibule some distance away. I arranged my face so I looked like a person who had recently been punished, gave her a baleful look with my red-rimmed eyes and then, with my head down, and resisting the temptation to give Mr Weatherall a goodbye wink, I scuttled off as if to lick my wounds.

In fact, I had a little thinking to do.

23 January 1788

Let’s see. How did this start? That’s right – with Judith Poulou saying that Madame Levene had a lover.

That was all Judith had said, one night after lights out, that Madame Levene had ‘a lover in the woods’, and the other girls had mainly scoffed at the idea. But not me. I’d remembered a night some time ago when, just after supper, I’d spied the dreaded headmistress from a dormitory window, wrapping herself in a shawl as she hurried down the steps away from the schoolhouse then melted into the darkness beyond.

There’d been something about the way she behaved that made me think she wasn’t just planning to take the air. The way she’d looked from left to right. The way she’d headed towards the path that led into the night of the sports fields and, yes, maybe, the woods at the perimeter.

It had taken me two nights of keeping watch, but last night I saw her again. Just as before, she left the schoolhouse, and with the same furtive air, although not furtive enough to detect a window opening above and me climbing from it, clambering down the trellis to the ground and setting off in pursuit.

At last I was putting my training into action. I became like a wraith in the night, keeping her just in sight, silently tracking her as she used the light of the moon to navigate her way along the lawn and to the perimeter of the sports fields.

They were an open expanse, and I scowled for a moment – then did what my mother and Mr Weatherall had always taught me to do. I assessed the situation. Madame Levene with the light of the moon behind her – her old bespectacled eyes versus my young ones. I decided to stay behind her, keeping her in the distance, so that she was little more than a shadow ahead of me. I saw the moonlight glint on her spectacles as she turned to check she wasn’t being followed, and I froze, became part of the night and prayed my calculations had been correct.

They were. The witch kept on going until she reached the treeline and was swallowed up the harsh shapes of tree trunks and undergrowth. I sped up and followed her, finding the same path she’d taken, which cut through the woods,

and became a ghost. The route reminded me of years spent taking a similar track to see Mr Weatherall. A track that used to end with my protector perched waiting on his tree stump, smiling, unburdened then by the weight of my mother's death.

I'd never smelt wine on his breath back then.

I banished the memory as ahead of us I saw the small groundsman's lodge and realized where she was heading. I drew to halt and from my position behind a tree watched as she knocked gently and the door was opened. I heard her say, 'I couldn't wait to see you,' and there was the distinct sound of a kiss – *a kiss* – and then she disappeared inside, the door closing behind her.

So this was her lover in the woods. Jacques the groundsman, of whom I knew little other than what I'd seen as he attended to his duties in the middle distance. One thing I did know was that he was much younger than Madame Levene. What a dark horse she was.

I returned knowing the rumours were true. And, unfortunately for her, not only was I the one in possession of that information, but I was not above using it to get what I wanted from her. Indeed, that was precisely what I intended to do.

25 January 1788

Just after lunch, Judith came to see me. The very same Judith from whom I'd heard the rumour about Madame Levene's lover. Neither one of my enemies nor my admirers, Judith held her face impassive as she delivered the news that the headmistress wanted to see me in her office right away, in order to talk about the theft of a horseshoe from above the dormitory door.

I made my face grave as if to say, 'Oh God, not again. When will this torture ever end?', when in fact I couldn't have been more thrilled. Madame Levene was playing right into my hands. Handed to me on a plate was a golden opportunity to give her the good news that I knew all about her lover, *Jacques*, because while she thought she was going to cane me for stealing the dormitory's lucky horseshoe, in actual fact I'd be leaving not with the usual smarting palm and a seething sense of injustice, but with a letter for my father. A letter in which Madame Levene informed him that his daughter Élise was to be leaving for individual English tuition in … *guess*.

If all went to plan, that was.

At her door I knocked smartly, entered and then, with my shoulders flung back and my chin inclined, strode across her office to where she sat before the window and dropped the horseshoe to her desk.

There was a moment of silence. Those beady eyes fixed on the unwelcome bit of rusted iron on her desk then rose to meet mine, but instead of the usual look of disdain and barely masked hatred, there was something else there – some unreadable emotion I'd never seen in her before.

'Ah,' she said, a slight tremor in her voice, 'very good. You have returned the stolen horseshoe.'

'That's what you wanted to see me about, wasn't it?' I said carefully, less sure of myself all of a sudden.

'That was what I told Judith I wanted to see you about, yes.' She reached beneath her desk and I heard the sound of a drawer scraping open, and she added, 'But there was another reason.'

I felt a chill and hardly dared speak. 'And what was that, madame?'

'This,' she said, placing something on the desk in front of her.

It was my journal. I felt my eyes widen and was suddenly short of breath, my fists flexing.

'You …' I tried, but could not finish. You …'

She levelled a trembling bony finger at me and her eyes blazed as her voice rose, her anger matching mine. 'Don't come the victim with me, young lady. Not after what I've read.' The pointing finger jabbed at the cover of my journal. Inside it were my most private thoughts. It had been taken from its hiding place beneath my mattress and pored over by my hated enemy.

My temper began to rise. I fought to control my breathing and my shoulders rose and fell, fists still clenching and unclenching.

'How … how much did you read?' I managed.

'Enough to know you were planning to blackmail me,' she said tersely. 'No more, no less.'

Even in the heat of my anger I couldn't miss the irony. We were both caught – hoisted halfway between shame at our own actions and outrage at what had been done to us. Myself, I felt a potent brew of fury, guilt and sheer hatred, and in my mind formed the image of me diving across the desk at her, hands fixing round her neck as her eyes bulged behind her round spectacles …

Instead, I simply stared at her, barely able to comprehend what was happening. How could you?'

'Because I saw you, Élise de la Serre. I saw you creeping around outside the cottage the other night. I saw you spying on me and Jacques. And so I thought, not unreasonably, that your journal might illuminate me as to your intentions. Do you deny that you intended to blackmail me, de la Serre?' Her colour rose. '*Blackmail* the headmistress of the school?'

But our fury was at cross-purposes.

'Reading my journal is unforgivable,' I raged.

Her voice rose. 'What you planned to do was unforgivable. *Blackmail*.' She spat the word as though as she couldn't quite believe it. As though she had never even encountered the concept before.

I bridled. 'I meant you no harm. It was a means to an end.'

'I dare say you relished the prospect of it, Élise de la Serre.' She brandished my journal. 'I've read exactly what you think of me. Your hatred – no, worse, your *contempt* – for me pours off every page.'

I shrugged. 'Does that surprise you? After all, don't *you* hate *me*?'

'Oh, you stupid girl,' she said furiously, 'of course I don't *hate* you. I'm your headmistress. I want what's best for you. And, for your information, I don't listen at doors either.'

I gave her a doubtful look. ‘You seemed gleeful enough when it came to the thought of my impending punishment.’

Her eyes dropped. ‘In the heat of the moment we all say things we shouldn’t, and I regretted that remark. But the fact is, while you’re by no means my favourite person in the world, I’m your headmistress. Your guardian. And you, in particular, came to me a damaged girl, fresh from the loss of her mother. You, in particular, needed special attention. Oh, yes, my attempts to help have taken the form of a battle of wills, and I suppose that’s hardly surprising, and, yes, I suppose the fact you think I hate you is to be expected – or was, when you were younger and first arrived here. But you’re a young lady now, Élise, you should know better. I read no more of your journal than I needed to in order to establish your guilt, but I read enough to know that your future lies in a different direction to that of the majority of the pupils here, and for that I’m pleased. Nobody with your spirit should settle down to a life of domesticity.’

I started, hardly able to believe what I was hearing, and she soaked it up before continuing, her voice softer. ‘And now we find ourselves at a difficult juncture, for we have both done something terrible and we both have something the other wants. From you I want silence about what you saw; from me you want a letter to your father.’ She passed the journal across the table to me. ‘I’m going to give you your letter. I’m going to lie for you. I’m going to tell him that you will be spending part of your final year in London so that you can do what it is you need to do, and when you have exorcized whatever it is that compels you to go, I trust it will be a different Élise de la Serre who returns to me. One who has held on to the spirit of the little girl but abandoned the hot-headed juvenile.’

The letter would be with me by the afternoon, she said and I stood to leave, feeling mollified, shame making my head heavy. As I reached the door she stopped me. ‘One more thing, Élise. Jacques isn’t my lover. He’s my son.’

I don’t think Mother would be very proud of me just now.

7 February 1788

i.

I am a long way from Saint-Cyr now. And after a fairly tumultuous last two days I write this entry in …

Well, no. Let's not give anything away just yet. Let's go back to when I took my carriage away from the dreaded *Le Palais de la Misère*, when there was no backwards glance, no friends to bid me *Bon voyage* and certainly no Madame Levene standing at the window waving her handkerchief. There was just me in a carriage and my trunk lashed to the top.

'We're here,' the coachman said when we arrived at the docks in Calais. It was late and the sea was a dark, undulating shimmer beyond the cobbles of the harbour and the bobbing masts of moored ships. Above us, squawking gulls, and around us, the people of the docks staggering from tavern to tavern – the night in full swing, a rowdy hubbub in the air. My coachman took disapproving looks left and right then stood on the running board to free my trunk before laying it on the cobbles of the dockside. He opened my door and his eyes boggled. I was not the same girl he'd picked up.

Why? Because during the journey I'd changed. Off had come the accursed dress and I now wore breeches, a shirt, a waistcoat and a frock coat. I'd cast aside the dreaded bonnet, unpinned my hair and tied it back. And now, as I stepped out of the carriage, I plonked my tricorn on my head, bent to my trunk and opened it, all under the speechless gaze of the coachman. My trunk was full of the clothes I hated and trinkets I planned to throw away anyway. All I needed was in my satchel – that and the short sword that I pulled from the trunk's depths and tied round my waist, allowing my satchel to fall over it so it was hidden.

'You can keep the trunk, if you like,' I said. From my waistcoat I took a small leather purse and proffered coins.

'Who's here to escort you then?' he said, pocketing them as he looked around, scowling at the night-time revellers making their way along the dockside.

'Nobody.'

He looked askance at me. 'Is this some kind of joke?'

‘No, why would it be?’

‘You can’t be roaming the docks on your own at this hour.’

I dropped another coin into his palm. He looked at it.

‘No,’ he said firmly. ‘I can’t allow it, I’m afraid.’

I dropped another coin into his palm.

‘All right then,’ he acquiesced. ‘On your own head be it. Just steer clear of the taverns and stay near the lantern light. Watch the docks, they’re high and uneven, and many an unfortunate has fallen off them from getting too close for a peek over the edge. And don’t catch anybody’s eye. Oh, and whatever you do, keep that purse hidden.’

I smiled sweetly, knowing I intended to take all of his advice apart from the bit about the taverns, because the taverns were exactly where I wanted to be. I watched the carriage draw away, then headed straight to the nearest one.

The first one I came to had no name, but hanging above a set of windows was a wooden sign on which was a pair of crudely drawn antlers, so let’s call it the Antlers. As I stood on the cobbles gathering the courage to go inside, the door opened, allowing a blast of warm air, exuberant piano and the stink of ale to escape, as well as a man and a woman, rosy-cheeked and unsteady on their feet, each holding the other up. In the instant of the open door I got a glimpse of the tavern inside, and it was like staring into a furnace before the door shut quickly and then it was quiet on the dockside once more, the noise from inside the Antlers reduced to a background babble.

I braced myself. *All right, Élise. You wanted to get away from that prim and proper school, the rules and regulations you hated. On the other side of that door lies the exact opposite to school. The question is: are you really as tough as you think you are?*

(The answer, I was about to find out, was no.)

Entering was like walking into a new world fashioned entirely from smoke and noise. The sound of raucous laughter, squawking birds, the piano and drunken singing assaulted my ears.

It was a small room, with a balcony at one end and birdcages hanging from beams, and it was packed with drinkers. Men lounged at tables or on the floor and the balcony seemed to heave with people craning over to heckle revellers below. I stayed by the door, lingering in the shadows. Drinkers nearby eyed me with interest, and I heard a wolf whistle cut through the din, then caught the eye of a serving woman in an apron, who turned from setting down two jugs of ale on a table, the ale thankfully arresting the attention of the men sitting there.

‘I’m looking for the captain of a ship leaving for London in the morning,’ I said loudly.

She wiped her hands on her apron and rolled her eyes. ‘Any particular captain? Any particular ship?’

I shook my head. It didn’t matter.

She nodded, looking me up and down. ‘See that table at the back there?’ I squinted through the ropes of smoke and capering bodies to a table in the far corner. ‘Go up back, speak to the one they call Middle Man. Tell him Clémence sent you.’

I looked harder, seeing three men sitting with their backs to the far wall, curtains of smoke giving them the look of ghosts, like returning spirit-drinkers, cursed to haunt the tavern for ever more.

‘Which one is Middle Man?’ I asked Clémence.

She smirked as she moved off. ‘He’s the one in the middle.’

Feeling exposed I began to make my way towards Middle Man and his two friends. Faces were upturned as I threaded through the tables.

‘Now that’s a very fetching little one to be in a place like this,’ I heard, as well as a couple of other more near-the-knuckle suggestions that modesty forbids me sharing. Thank God for the smoke and gloom and noise and the overall state of drunkenness that hung over the place. It meant that only those nearest to me paid me any interest.

I came to the three spirit-men and stood before the table where they sat facing the room with tankards close at hand, dragging their gaze away from the festivities and to me. Whereas others had leered or pulled faces or made lewd drunken suggestions, they simply stared appraisingly. Middle Man, smaller than his two companions, gazed past me and I turned in time to catch a glimpse of the grinning serving woman as she slid away.

Uh-oh. All of a sudden I was conscious of how far away I was from the door. Here in the depths of the tavern it was even darker. The drinkers behind me seemed to have closed in on me. The flames from a fire flickered on the walls and the faces of the three men watching me. I thought of my mother’s advice, and wondered what Mr Weatherall would say. Stay impassive but watchful. Assess the situation. (And ignore that nagging feeling that you should have done all that *before* entering the tavern.)

‘And what’s a fine-dressed young woman doing all by herself in a place like this?’ said the man in the middle. Unsmiling he fished a long-stemmed pipe from his breast pocket and fitted it into a gap between his crooked, blackened teeth, chomping on it with a pink gum.

‘I was told you might be able to help me find the captain of a ship,’ I said.

‘And what might you be wanting a captain for?’

‘For passage to London.’

‘To London?’

‘Yes,’ I said.

‘You mean to Dover?’

I felt my colour rise, swallowed my stupidity. ‘Of course,’ I said.

Middle Man’s eyes danced with amusement. ‘And you need a captain for this trip, do you?’

‘Quite.’

‘Well, why don’t you just take the packet?’

The out-of-depth feeling had returned. ‘The packet?’

Middle Man suppressed a smirk. ‘Never mind, girl. Where you from?’

Somebody jostled me rudely from behind. I shoved back with my shoulder and heard a drunk rebound to a nearby table, spilling drinks and being roundly cursed for his pains, before folding to the floor.

‘From Paris,’ I told Middle Man.

‘Paris, eh?’ He took the pipe from his mouth and a rope of drool dropped to the tabletop as he used it as a pointer. ‘From one of the more salubrious areas of town, though, I’ll be bound, just to look at you, I mean.’

I said nothing.

The pipe was returned. The pink gum chomped down. ‘What’s your name, girl?’

‘Élise,’ I told him.

‘No second name?’

I made a non-committal expression.

‘Could it be that I might recognize your surname?’

‘I value my privacy, that’s all.’

He nodded some more. ‘Well,’ he said, ‘I think I can find you a captain to speak to. Matter of fact, me and my friends were just on our way to meet this particular gentleman for an ale or two. Why don’t you join us?’

He made as if to stand …

This was all wrong. I tensed, aware of the clamour around me, jostled by drinkers and yet, somehow, completely isolated, then gave a small bow without taking my eyes from theirs. ‘I thank you for your time, gentlemen, but I’ve had second thoughts.’

Middle Man looked taken aback and his lips cracked in a smile, revealing more graveyard teeth. This was what a minnow saw – seconds before it was devoured by a shark.

‘Second thoughts, eh?’ he said with a sidelong look left and right at his two bigger companions. ‘How do you mean? Like you’ve decided you don’t want to

go to London no more? Or is it that me and my friends don't look sufficiently seafaring for your liking?'

'Something like that,' I said, and pretended not to notice the man on his left push back his chair as though ready to leave his seat and the man on the other flank lean forward almost imperceptibly.

'You're suspicious of us, is that it?'

'Might be,' I agreed with jutted chin. I folded my arms across my chest and used it as an opportunity to bring my right hand closer to the hilt of my sword.

'And why might that be?' he asked.

'Well, you haven't asked me how much I can afford, for a start.'

Again he smiled. 'Oh, you'll be earning your berth to London.'

I pretended not to understand what he meant. 'Well, that's quite all right, and I thank you for your time, but I shall take care of my own passage.'

He laughed openly. 'Taking care of your passage was what we had in mind.'

Again I let it wash over me. 'I shall take my leave, messieurs,' I said, bowing slightly, making to turn and push my way back through the throng.

'No, you won't,' said Middle Man, and with a wave of his hand he set his two dogs upon me.

The men stood, hands on their swords at their waists. I stepped back and to the side, drawing my own sword and brandishing it at the first, a movement that stopped them both in their tracks.

'Ooh,' said one, and the two of them began to laugh. That rattled me. For a second I had no idea how to react as Middle Man reached into his jacket and produced a curved dagger and the second man wiped the smile off his face and came forward.

I tried to ward him off with the sword but I wasn't assertive enough and there were too many people around. What should have been a confident warning slash across the face was ineffective.

'You're to use it for practice.'

But I hadn't. In almost ten years of schooling I'd barely practised my swording at all, and though I had on occasion, when the dormitory around me was quiet, taken the presentation box from its hiding place, opened it to inspect the steel anew, running my fingers over the inscription on the blade, I had rarely taken it to a private place in order to work on my drills. Just enough to prevent my skills calcifying completely, not enough to prevent them rusting.

And either that or my inexperience, or more likely a combination of the two, meant that I was woefully unprepared to take on these three men. And when it came to it, it wasn't some dazzling swordplay that sent me sprawling to the wet and stinking sawdust-strewn boards of the tavern, but a two-handed push from

the first of the thugs to reach me. He'd seen what I hadn't. Behind me lay the same drunken man who had recoiled off me earlier, and as I skated back a step and my ankles met him I lost my balance, fell, and in the next instant was lying on top of him.

'Monsieur,' I said, hoping that somehow my desperation would penetrate the veil of alcohol, but his eyes were glassy and his face wet with drink. In the next second I was screaming with pain as the heel of a boot landed on the back of my hand, grinding the flesh and making me let go of the sword. Another foot kicked my beloved sword away, and I rolled and tried to get to my feet, but hands grabbed me and pulled me up. My desperate eyes went from the crowds who had shrunk away, most laughing as they enjoyed the show, to the prone drunken man and then to my short sword, which was now beneath the table out of harm's way. I kicked and writhed. Before me was Middle Man brandishing his curved knife, lips pulled back in a mirthless grin, teeth still chomped round the stem of the pipe. I heard a door open behind me, a sudden rush of chill wind and then I was being dragged out into the night.

It had all happened so quickly. One moment I was in the heaving tavern, the next in an almost empty yard, just me, Middle Man and his two thugs. They shoved me to the ground and I stayed there a second, snarling and catching my breath, trying to show them a brave face but inside thinking, *Stupid – stupid, inexperienced, arrogant little girl*.

What the hell had I been thinking?

The yard opened out to the dockside at the front of the Antlers, where people passed, either ignorant or oblivious to my plight, while not far away was a small carriage. Middle Man jumped up to it now, one of his thugs grabbing me roughly by the shoulders while the other yanked open the door. I caught a glimpse of another girl inside, younger than me, maybe fifteen or sixteen, who had long blonde hair down to her shoulders, and wore a ragged brown smock dress, the dress of a peasant girl. Her eyes were wide and frightened and her mouth open in an appeal I didn't hear over the sound of my own screaming and shouting. The thug carried me easily, but as he tried to swing me into the carriage my feet found purchase on the side and, knees bent, I shoved myself off, forcing him backwards into the yard and making him curse. I used the momentum to my advantage, twisting round again so that this time he lost his footing and we both tumbled to the dirt.

Our dance was greeted with a gale of laughter from Middle Man atop the carriage, as well as the thug holding the door, and behind their merriment I could hear the sobbing of the girl and knew that if the thugs managed to bundle me into the carriage then we were both lost.

And then the back door to the tavern opened, cutting off their laugher with a gust of noise and heat and smoke, and a figure staggered out, already reaching into his breeches.

It was the same drunken man. He stood with his legs apart, about to relieve himself on the wall of the tavern, craning his head back over his shoulder.

'Everything all right over there?' he croaked, head lolling as he returned to the serious business of undoing the buttons of his breeches.

'No, monsieur –' I started, but the first thug grabbed me and held my mouth, muffling my cry. I wriggled and tried to bite, to no avail. Sitting in the driver's seat still, Middle Man gazed down upon us all: me, pinned to the ground and gagged by the first thug; the drunk man still fiddling with his breeches; the second thug awaiting his instructions with an upturned face. Middle Man drew a finger across his throat.

I increased my efforts to get free, shouting into the hand clamped over my mouth and ignoring the pain of his elbows and knees as I writhed on the ground, hoping somehow to wriggle free or at least make enough noise to attract the drunkard's attention.

Casting a look towards the yard entrance, the second thug drew his sword silently then moved up on the oblivious drunkard. I saw the girl in the carriage. She had moved across the seats and was peeking out. *Shout out, warn him*. I wanted to scream but couldn't and so settled for gnashing my teeth instead, trying to nip the flesh of the sweaty hand across my mouth. For a second our eyes met and I tried to urge her simply with the power of my gaze, blinking furiously and widening my eyes and swivelling them over to the drunk man who stood concentrating on his breeches, death just a foot or so away.

But she couldn't do anything. She was too scared. Too scared to shout out and too scared to move, and the drunk man was going to die and the thugs were going to bundle us in the carriage and then into a ship, and then … well, put it this way, I was going to wish I was back at school.

The blade rose. But then something happened – the drunk man wheeled round, faster than I would have thought possible, and in his hands was my short sword, which flashed, tasting blood for the first time as he swept it flat across the thug's throat, which opened, spaying crimson mist into the yard.

For maybe half a second the only reaction was shock and the only noise the wet sound of lifeblood leaving the thug. Then with a roar of anger and defiance the first thug took his knee off my neck and leapt at the drunkard.

I'd allowed myself to believe that the drunkenness was an act, and that he was in fact an expert swordsman *pretending* to be drunk. But no, I realized, as he stood there swaying from side to side and trying to focus on the advancing

henchman, though he may well have been an expert swordsman, he was certainly drunk. Enraged, the first thug charged him, wielding his sword. It wasn't pretty, but even though he was in his cups, my saviour seemed to dodge him easily, striking backhand with my short sword, catching the thug on the arm and eliciting a scream of pain.

From above me I heard, 'Ha!' and looked up in time to see Middle Man shake the reins. For him the battle was over and he didn't want to leave empty-handed. As the carriage lurched towards the entrance with its passenger door swinging, I sprang to my feet and sprinted after it, reaching inside just as it came to the narrow entrance to the yard.

I had one chance. One moment. 'Grab my hand,' I screamed, and thank God she was more decisive than she had been before. With desperate, frightened eyes, her cry a guttural shout, she lunged across the seats and grabbed my outstretched hand. I flung myself backwards and dragged her out of the carriage door just as it skittered through the yard entrance and was gone, clacking away along the cobbles of the dockside. From my left came a shout. It was the remaining thug. I saw his mouth drop open in the shock of abandonment.

The drunken swordsman made him pay for his moment of outrage. He ran him through where he stood and my sword tasted blood for the second time.

Mr Weatherall had once made me promise never to name my sword. Now, as I watched the henchman slide off the blood-dripping blade and crumple dead to the dirt, I understood why.

ii.

'Thank you, monsieur,' I called into the silence that descended over the yard in the wake of the battle.

The drunken swordsman looked at me. He had long hair tied back, high cheekbones and faraway eyes.

'May we know your name, monsieur?' I shouted.

We might have been meeting at a civilized social function but for the two bodies sprawled on the dirt – that and the fact that he held a sword stained red with blood. He moved as though to hand my sword back to me, realized it needed a clean, looked for somewhere to wipe it and then, finding nothing, settled for the body of the nearest thug. When that was done he raised a finger, said, 'Excuse me,' and turned and vomited against the wall of the Antlers.

The blonde girl and I looked at one another. That finger was still held up as the drunkard coughed up the last of his vomit, spat out a final mouthful then turned and gathered himself before sweeping off an imaginary hat, making an

exaggerated bow and introducing himself. ‘My name is Captain Byron Jackson. At your service.’

‘Captain?’

‘Yes – as I was trying to tell you in the tavern before you so rudely shoved me away.’

I bristled. ‘I did no such thing. You were very rude. You pushed into me. You were drunk.’

‘Correction, I *am* drunk. And maybe also rude. However, there’s no disguising the fact that though drunk and rude I was also trying to help you. Or at the very least keep you from the grasp of these reprobates.’

‘Well, you didn’t manage that.’

‘Yes, I did,’ he said, offended, then seemed to think. ‘Eventually, I did. And on that note, we had better leave before these bodies are discovered by the soldiers. You desire passage to Dover, is that right?’

He saw me hesitate and waved an arm at the two bodies. ‘Surely I’ve proved my suitability as an escort? I promise you, mademoiselle, that despite appearances to the contrary, my drunkenness, and perhaps a certain uncouth manner, I fly with the angels. Just that my wings are a little singed is all.’

‘Why should I trust you?’

‘You don’t have to trust me,’ he said, and shrugged. ‘No skin off my nose who you trust. Go back in there and you can get the packet.’

‘The packet?’ I repeated, irritated. ‘What is this *packet*?’

‘The packet is any ship carrying mail or freight to Dover. Virtually every man in there is a packet-man, and they’ll be in the process of drinking up, because the tides and winds are ripe for a crossing tonight. So by all means go back in there, flash your coin and you can secure yourself passage. Who knows? You might even get lucky and find yourself in the company of other fine lady travellers such as yourself.’ He pulled a face. ‘You might not, of course …’

‘And what’s in it for you if I come with you?’

He scratched the back of his neck, looking amused. ‘A lonely merchant would be very glad of the company for the crossing.’

‘As long as the lonely merchant didn’t get any ideas.’

‘Such as?’

‘Such as the ways in which he might pass the time.’

He gave a hurt look. ‘I can assure you the thought never crossed my mind.’

‘And you, of course, would never consider telling an untruth?’

‘Absolutely not.’

‘Such as claiming to be a merchant when you are, in fact, a smuggler?’

He threw up his hands. ‘Oh, that’s just dandy. She’s never heard of the packet and thinks you can sail straight to London, but makes me for a smuggler.’

‘So you *are* a smuggler?’

‘Look, do you want passage or not?’

I thought about that for a moment or so.

‘Yes,’ I said, and stepped forward to retrieve my sword.

‘Tell me, what is the inscription near the hilt?’ he asked, handing it over. ‘I would of course read it myself but for the fact that I’m drunk.’

‘Are you sure it’s not that you cannot read?’ I said teasingly.

‘Oh, woe. Truly my lady has been fooled by my rough manners. What can I do to convince her that I really am a gentleman?’

‘Well, you could try behaving like one,’ I said.

I took the proffered sword and with it held loosely in my palm I read the inscription on the hilt. ‘May the father of understanding guide you. Love, Mother,’ and then before he could say anything I brought the point of the sword to his neck and pressed it into the flesh of his throat. ‘And on her life if you do anything to harm me then I will run you through,’ I snarled.

He tensed, held out his arms, and looked along the blade at me with eyes that were laughing a little too much for my liking. ‘I promise, mademoiselle. Tempting though it would be to touch a creature quite so exquisite as yourself, I shall be sure to keep my hands to myself. And anyway,’ he said, looking over my shoulder, ‘what about your friend?’

‘My name is Hélène,’ the blonde girl said as she came forward. Her voice trembled. ‘I am indebted to the mademoiselle for my life. I belong to her now.’

‘*What?*’

I dropped the sword and turned to face her. ‘No you don’t. No you aren’t. You must find your people.’

‘I have no people. I am yours, mademoiselle,’ she said, and I had never seen a face so earnest.

‘I think that settles that,’ said Byron Jackson from behind me. I looked from him then back to her, lost for words.

And with that I had acquired a lady’s maid and a captain.

iii.

Byron Jackson, it turned out, was indeed a smuggler. An Englishman posing as a Frenchman, he piled his small ship, the *Granny Smith*, with tea, sugar and whatever else was taxed heavily by his government, sailed it to England’s east

coast, then by means he would only describe as ‘magic’ smuggled it past the customs houses.

Hélène, meanwhile, was a peasant girl who had watched both her mother and father die, and so had travelled to Calais in the hope of finding her last remaining living relative, her uncle Jean. She wanted to find a new life with him; instead he sold her to Middle Man. And, of course, Middle Man would want his money back and Uncle Jean would have spent the money within a day or so of receiving it, so there would be trouble involving Hélène if she stayed. So I let her be indebted to me, and we made a fellowship of three as we set off from Calais. The *Granny Smith* is a small two-mast schooner – just the three of us on board – but it is robust and remarkably homely.

And now I can hear the sounds of supper being laid. Our gracious host has promised us a hearty repast. He has enough food, he says, for the whole of the two-day crossing.

8 February 1788

i.

‘If she’s to be your lady’s maid she needs to learn some manners,’ Byron Jackson had remarked at dinner last night.

Which, when you considered that he drank constantly from his flask of wine and ate with his mouth open and his elbows propped on the table, was a statement burdened with a staggering degree of hypocrisy.

I looked at Hélène. She’d torn off a piece of crust, dipped it in her soup and was about to shove the whole dripping hunk into her mouth, but had stopped and was now regarding us from under her hair, as though we were talking in a strange, foreign language.

‘She’s fine as she is,’ I said, mentally thumbing my nose at Madame Levene, my father, the Crows and every servant in our house at Versailles, all of whom would have been repulsed by my new friend’s table manners.

‘She might be fine for having her supper on board a smuggling vessel,’ said Byron cheerfully, ‘but she won’t be fine when you’re trying to pass her off as your lady’s maid in London during this “secret assignation” of yours.’

I shot him an irritated look. ‘It’s not a secret assignation.’

He grinned. ‘You could have fooled me. Either way, you’re going to need to teach her how to behave in public. For a start she needs to begin addressing you as “mademoiselle”. She needs to know the basics of etiquette and decorum.’

‘Yes, all right, thank you, Byron,’ I said primly. ‘I don’t need you to tell me about table manners. I shall teach her myself.’

‘As you please, mademoiselle,’ he said, and grinned. He did that a lot. Both the sarcastically referring to me as ‘mademoiselle’ and the grinning.

When supper was over, Byron took his flask of wine and some animal skins above decks and left us to prepare for bed. I wondered what he was doing up there, what he was thinking.

We sailed through the next day. Byron tethered the wheel with rope and then he and I sparred, my neglected swording skills beginning to return as I danced across the boards and our steel met. I could tell he was impressed. He laughed

and smiled and gave me encouragement. A more handsome sparring partner than Mr Weatherall, though perhaps a little less disciplined.

That night after we ate Hélène retired to her berth in the cramped conditions we called our cabin below decks while Byron left to man the wheel. Only this time, I reached for an animal skin of my own.

'Have you ever used your sword in anger before?' he asked, when I joined him on the upper deck. He sat steering with his feet and drinking from his leather flask of wine.

'By anger you mean …'

'Well, let's start with, have you ever killed anyone?'

'No.'

'I'd be the first, eh, if I tried to touch you without your permission?'

'Exactly.'

'Well, I shall just have to make sure that I have your permission, then, shan't I?'

'Believe you me, you shall never have it, sir. I am betrothed to another. Please take your attentions elsewhere.'

It was not true, of course. Arno and I were not betrothed. And yet, as I stood on deck and the moon-dappled sea sucked at the hull and the night was almost totally still around me, I fought a sudden wave of feeling too far away from home, and a knowledge that, above all, I missed Arno. For the first time I understood that my love for him went beyond childhood friendship. I didn't just 'love' Arno. I loved him.

Opposite me, Byron nodded, as though able to read my thoughts and seeing that I was serious at least, realizing I was a prize he could not claim. 'I understand,' he said. 'This "other", he is a lucky man.'

I raised my chin. 'As you say.'

He became business-like and raised the point of his blade. 'Let us begin. So have you ever crossed swords with an opponent?'

'Of course.'

'An opponent who meant you harm?'

'No,' I admitted.

'Fair enough. Have you ever drawn your sword in order to protect yourself?'

'Indeed I have.'

'How many times?'

'Once.'

'And that was the one time, was it? Back there in the tavern?'

I pursed my lips. 'Yes.'

'Didn't go so well for you, did it?'

‘No.’

‘And why was that, do you think?’

‘I know why it was, thank you,’ I said. ‘I don’t need telling by the likes of you.’

‘Go on, humour me.’

‘Because I hesitated.’

He nodded thoughtfully, swigged from his flask then handed it to me. I gulped down a mouthful, feeling the alcohol spread warmly through my body. I wasn’t stupid. I knew that the first step to gaining a lady’s permission to get into her bed was to get her drunk. But it was cold and he was agreeable company, if a little frustrating and … Oh, and nothing. I just drank.

‘That’s right. What should you have done?’

‘Look, I don’t need –’

‘Don’t you? You were almost carried away back there. You know what they would have done to you after taking you from that yard. You wouldn’t be above deck sipping wine with the captain. You’d have spent the voyage below deck, on your back, amusing the crew. Every member of the crew. And when you arrived at Dover, broken, mentally and physically, they would have sold you like cattle. Both of you. You and Hélène. All of that but for my presence in the tavern. And you still don’t think I have a right to tell you where you went wrong?’

‘I went wrong going in the tavern in the bloody first place,’ I said.

He arched an eyebrow. ‘Been to England before, have you?’ he asked.

‘No, but it was an Englishman who taught me my sword skills.’

He chortled. ‘And what he’d tell you if he were here is that your hesitancy almost cost you your life. A short sword is not a warning weapon. It is a doing weapon. If you draw it, use it, don’t just wave it around.’ He lowered his eyes, took a long, thoughtful slurp from his leather flask and passed it back to me. ‘There are plenty of reasons to kill a man: duty, honour, vengeance. All of them might give you pause for thought. And a reason for guilty reflection afterwards. But self-protection or protection of another, killing in the name of protection, that is one reason you should never have to worry about.’

ii.

The following day Hélène and I bid goodbye to Byron Jackson on the beach at Dover. He had much work to do, he said, in order to bypass the customs houses, so Hélène and I would have to manage alone. He accepted the coins I gave him with a gracious bow and we went on our way.

As we took the path away from the beach, I turned to see him watching us go, waved and was pleased to see him wave back. And then he turned, and was gone, and we took the steps towards the clifftop, the Dover lighthouse as our guide.

Though I had been told the carriage ride to London could be hazardous, thanks to highwaymen, our journey passed without incident and we arrived to find London a very similar city to the Paris I had left behind, with a blanket of dark fog hovering above the rooftops and a menacing River Thames crowded with traffic. The same stink of smoke and excrement and wet horse.

In a cab I said to the driver in perfect English, 'Excuse me, Sir, but could you please be transporting myself and my companion to the home of the Carrolls in Mayfair?'

'Whatchootalkinabaht?' He peered at us through the hinged communication hatch. Rather than try again I simply passed him the piece of paper. Then, when we were moving, Hélène and I pulled the blinds and took turns hanging on to the communication hatch as we changed. I retrieved my by now rather creased and careworn dress from the bottom of my satchel and instantly regretted not taking the time to fold it more carefully. Meanwhile, Hélène discarded her peasant's dress in favour of my breeches, shirt and waistcoat – not much of an improvement considering the dirt I'd manage to accrue over the last three days, but it would have to do.

Finally we were dropped off at the home of the Carrolls in Mayfair, where the driver opened the door and gave us the now-familiar boggle eyes as two differently dressed girls materialized before his very eyes. He offered to knock and introduce us but I dismissed him with a gold coin.

And then, as we stood with the two colonnades of the entrance on either side, my new lady's maid and I, we took a deep breath, hearing approaching footsteps before the door was opened by a round-faced man in a tailcoat who smelled faintly of silver polish.

I introduced myself and he nodded, recognizing my name it seemed, then led us through an opulent reception hall to a carpeted hallway where he asked us to wait outside what appeared to be a dining room, the sound of polite chatter and civilized clinking of cutlery emanating from within.

With the door ajar I heard him say, 'My lady, you have a visitor. A Mademoiselle de la Serre from Versailles is here to see you.'

There was a moment of shocked silence. Outside in the hallway I caught Hélène's eye and wondered if I looked as worried as she did.

Then the butler reappeared, bidding us, 'Come in,' and we entered to see the occupants seated at the dining-room table having just enjoyed a hearty meal: Mr

and Mrs Carroll, whose mouths were in the process of dropping open; May Carroll, who clapped her hands together with sarcastic delight, ‘Oh, it’s Smell-bag,’ she crowed, and the mood I was in I could easily have stepped over and given her a slap for her troubles; and Mr Weatherall, who was already rising to his feet, his face reddening, roaring, ‘What the bloody hell do you think you’re doing here?’

11 February 1788

My protector gave me a couple of days to settle in before coming to see me this morning. In the meantime I've borrowed clothes from May Carroll, who was at pains to tell me that dresses lent to me were 'old' and 'rather out of fashion' and not really the sort of thing she'd be wearing this season – but would be fine for you, Smell-bag.

'If you call me that one more time, I'll kill you,' I said.

'I beg your pardon?' she said.

'Oh, it's nothing. Thank you for the dresses.' And I meant it. Fortunately, I have inherited my mother's disdain for fashion, so although the out-of-fashion dresses were evidently designed to irritate me, they did nothing of the sort.

What irritates me is May Carroll.

Hélène, meanwhile, has been braving below-stairs life, finding that the servants are even more snooty than the aristocrats above, and it has to be said, wasn't doing an awfully good job when it came to masquerading as my lady's maid, performing strange, random curtsies while shooting constant terrified glances my way. We'd have to work on Hélène, there was no doubt about that. At least the Carrolls were so arrogant and pleased with themselves that they simply assumed Hélène was 'very French' and put her naivety down to that.

And then Mr Weatherall knocked.

'Are you decent?' I heard him say.

'Yes, monsieur, I am decent,' I replied, and my protector entered – and then immediately shielded his eyes.

'Bloody hell, girl, you said you were decent,' he rasped.

'I *am* decent,' I protested.

'What do you mean? You're wearing a nightdress.'

'Yes, but I am decent.'

He shook his head behind his hand. 'No, look, in England, when we say, "Are you decent?" it means "Have you got your clothes on?" '

May Carroll's nightdresses were hardly revealing, but even so I had no wish to scandalize Mr Weatherall, so he withdrew and some moments later we tried again. In he came, pulling up a chair while I perched on the end of the bed. The

last time I'd seen him was the night of our arrival, when he'd gone a shade of beetroot as Hélène and I entered the dining room, both of us looking like – what was the expression Mrs Carroll had used? – 'something the cat had dragged in', and I had quickly spun a story about having been held up by highwaymen on the road between Dover and London.

I had cast my eyes around the table, seeing faces that I had first laid eyes on well over a decade ago. Mrs Carroll looked no different, the same for her husband. The two of them wearing the usual bemused smile so beloved of the English upper classes. May Carroll, though, had grown – and if anything looked even more tiresomely haughty than when we had first met in Versailles.

Mr Weatherall, meanwhile, was forced to pretend that he was aware of my upcoming arrival, masking his obvious surprise as concern for my well-being. The Carrolls had worn a selection of bemused looks and asked a number of searching questions, but he and I had bluffed with enough confidence to avoid being ejected there and then.

To be honest, I thought we'd made a good team.

'What the bloody hell do you think you're playing at?' he said now.

I fixed him with a look. 'You know what I'm playing at.'

'For crying out loud, Élise, your father is going to have me killed for this. I'm not exactly his favourite person as it is. I'm going to wake up with a blade at my throat.'

'Everything has been smoothed over with Father,' I told him.

'And Madame Levene?'

I swallowed, not really wanting to think about Madame Levene if I could help it. 'That too.'

He cast me a sidelong glance. 'I don't want to know, do I?'

'No,' I assured him. 'You don't want to know.'

He frowned. 'Well, now you're here, we have to –'

'You can forget any thoughts you have of sending me home.'

'Oh, I'd love to send you home if I could – if I didn't think that by sending you home your father would want to know why, and I'd get in even deeper trouble. And if the Carrolls didn't have plans for you …'

I bridled. '*Plans* for me? I'm not their serf. I am Élise de la Serre, daughter of the Grand Master, a future Grand Master myself. They have no authority over *me*.'

He rolled his eyes. 'Oh, get over yourself, child. You're here in London as their guest. Not only that, you're hoping to benefit from their contacts in order to find Ruddock. If you didn't want them to have authority over you then maybe it would have been best not to have placed yourself in this position.' I began to

protest, but he held up a hand to stop me. ‘Look, being a Grand Master isn’t just about swordplay and behaving like Charlie Big Potatoes. It’s about diplomacy and statesmanship. Your mother knew that. Your father knows that and it’s about time you learnt it, too.’

I sighed. ‘What then? What do I have to do?’

‘They want you to insinuate yourself into a household here in London. You and your maid.’

‘They want me to – *what* – myself?’

‘Insinuate. Infiltrate.’

‘They want me to spy?’

He scratched his snowy-white beard uncomfortably. ‘In a manner of speaking. They want you to pose as someone else in order to gain entry into the household.’

‘Which is spying.’

‘Well … yes.’

I thought, and decided that despite everything, I quite liked the idea of it. ‘Is it dangerous?’

‘You’d like that, would you?’

‘It’s better than the Maison Royale. When am I to find out the details of my mission?’

‘Knowing this lot, when they’re good and ready. In the meantime I suggest you spend some time licking that so-called lady’s maid of yours into shape. Right this very moment in time she’s neither use nor ornament.’ He looked at me. ‘Quite what you did to inspire such loyalty I don’t suppose I’ll ever know.’

‘Perhaps best you don’t know,’ I told him.

‘Which reminds me. Something else while on the subject.’

‘What is that, monsieur?’

He cleared his throat, stared at his shoes, worked at his fingernails. ‘Well, it’s the crossing. This captain you found to bring you across.’

I felt myself redden. ‘Yes?’

‘What nationality was he?’

‘English, monsieur, like you.’

‘Right,’ he said, nodding, ‘right.’ He cleared his throat again, took a deep breath and raised his head to look me in the eye. ‘The crossing from Calais to Dover takes nothing like two days, Élise. It’s more like a couple of hours, if you’re lucky – nine, ten at the outside, if you’re not. Why do you think he kept you out there for two days?’

‘I’m quite sure I couldn’t possibly say, monsieur,’ I said primly.

He nodded. ‘You’re a beautiful girl, Élise. God knows you’re as beautiful as your mother ever was and let me tell you that every head turned when she walked into the room. You’re going to meet more than your fair share of rogues.’

‘I’m aware of that, monsieur.’

‘Arno awaits your return, no doubt, in Versailles?’

‘Exactly, monsieur.’

I hoped so.

He stood to go. ‘So precisely what did you do for two days on the English Channel, Élise?’

‘Swordplay, monsieur,’ I said. ‘We practised our swordplay.’

20 March 1788

The Carrolls have promised to help find Ruddock, and, according to Mr Weatherall, this puts a network of spies and informants at our disposal. ‘If he remains in London then he’ll be found, Élise, you can be sure of that.’ But, of course, they want me to accomplish this task.

I should be nervous about the assignment ahead, but poor Mr Weatherall was nervous enough, constantly fretting at his whiskers and worrying aloud at every turn. There wasn’t enough anxiety for us both.

And, anyway, he was right to assume I found the idea exciting. There’s no point in denying it, I do. And, after all, can you blame me? Ten years of the drab and hateful school. Ten years of wanting to reach out and take a destiny that remained just inches away from my fingertips. Ten years, in other words, of frustration and longing. I was ready.

Over a month has passed. I had to write a letter, which was then sent to Carroll associates in France, who sealed it and forwarded it to an address here in London. While we waited for a reply, I helped Hélène with her reading and taught her English and, in doing so, polished my own skills.

‘Will this be dangerous?’ Hélène asked me one afternoon, using English as we took a turn round the grounds.

‘It will, Hélène. You should remain here until I return, maybe try to find employment at another house.’

She switched to French, saying shyly. ‘You’re not getting rid of me that easily, mademoiselle.’

‘It’s not that I want to get rid of you, Hélène. You’re wonderful company and who wouldn’t want a friend who is so warm and generous of spirit? It’s just that I feel the debt is paid. I have no need of a maid, nor want the responsibility of one.’

‘What about a friend, mademoiselle? Perhaps I can be your friend?’

Hélène was the opposite of me. Where I let my mouth get me into trouble she was more reticent and days would pass when she’d barely say more than a word or two; while I was demonstrative, as quick to laughter as I was to temper, she kept her own counsel and rarely betrayed her emotions. And I know what you’re

thinking. The same as Mr Weatherall was thinking. That I could learn a thing or two from Hélène. Perhaps that's why I relented, just as I had when I first met her, and on several occasions since. I allowed her to stay with me and wondered why God had seen fit to favour me with this angel.

As well as spending time with Hélène, not to mention avoiding either of the stuck-up Carroll ladies, I have been practising sparring with Mr Weatherall, who …

Well, there's no getting round it – he's slowed down. He is not the swordsman he used to be. He's not as fast as he used to be. Not as clear-eyed. Was it age? After all, some fourteen years had passed since I first met Mr Weatherall, so undoubtedly there was that to consider. But also … At mealtime I watch him reach for the carafe of wine before the serving staff can get there, which doesn't go unnoticed by our hosts, judging by the way May Carroll looks down her nose at him. Their distaste makes me feel very protective of him. I tell myself he still mourns Mother.

'Perhaps a little less wine tonight, Mr Weatherall,' I joked during one session, when he bent to pick his wooden sparring sword from the grass at our feet.

'Oh, it's not the booze that's making me look bad. It's you. You underestimate your own skills, Élise.'

Maybe. Maybe not.

I also spent time writing to Father, reassuring him that my studies were continuing, and that I had 'knuckled down'. When it came to writing to Arno, I paused.

And then I wrote that I loved him.

Never before had I written a letter of such affection to him, and when I signed off by telling him I hoped to see him soon – in the next couple of months or so – I had never written words more true in my life.

So what if my reasons for wanting to see him were selfish? That I see him as an escape from my everyday responsibilities, a ray of sunlight in the dark of my destiny? Does it matter when my only desire is to bring him happiness?

I have been called. Hélène informs me that a letter has arrived, which means it's time for me to squeeze into a dress, go downstairs and find out what lies in store.

2 April 1788

i.

The day began with a panic.

‘We don’t think you should have a lady’s maid,’ said Mr Carroll.

The terrible trio stood in the reception hall of their house in Mayfair, regarding Hélène and me as we prepared to leave for our secret mission.

‘That’s quite all right with me,’ I said, and though I did of course feel a flutter of nerves at the thought of going alone I would at least have the advantage of not needing to worry about her.

‘No,’ said Mr Weatherall, coming forward. He shook his head emphatically. ‘She can invent a story about the family finding fortune. I don’t want her to go in there alone. It’s bad enough I can’t go with her.’

Mrs Carroll looked doubtful. ‘It’s one more thing she needs to remember. One more thing she needs to deal with.’

‘Mrs Carroll,’ growled Mr Weatherall, ‘with the greatest respect, that’s a right lot of poppycock. The role of a noble lady is one young Élise has been playing her entire life. She’ll be fine.’

Hélène and I stood patiently as our future was decided for us. Different in almost every other way, what she and I had in common was that other people decided our destinies for us. We were used to it.

And when they had finished our belongings were strapped to the roof of a carriage, and a coachman, an associate of the Carrolls we were assured could be trusted, took us across town to Bloomsbury, and an address at Queen Square.

ii.

‘It used to be called Queen Anne’s Square,’ the coachman had told us. ‘It’s just Queen Square now.’

He’d accompanied Hélène and me to the top of the steps and pulled the bell. As we waited I glanced around at the square, seeing two neat rows of white mansions side by side, very English. There were fields to the north and nearby a

church. Children played in the highway, darting in front of carts and carriages, the street alive with life.

We heard footsteps then a great scraping of bolts. I tried to look confident. I tried to look like the person I was supposed to be.

Which was?

'Miss Yvonne Albertine and her lady's maid, Hélène,' announced the coachman to the butler who opened the door, 'to see Miss Jennifer Scott.'

In contrast to the life and noise behind us, the house felt dark and foreboding, and I fought a strong sense of not wanting to go in there.

'Mademoiselle Scott is expecting you, mademoiselle,' said the expressionless butler.

We walked into a large entrance hall, which was dark with wood panelling and closed doors leading off. The only light came from windows on a landing above and the house was quiet, almost deathly quiet. For a second or so I struggled to think what the atmosphere reminded me of, and then I remembered: it was like our chateau in Versailles in the days after Mother had died. That same sense of time standing still, of life carried out in whispers and silent footsteps.

I had been warned it would be like this: that Mademoiselle Jennifer Scott, a spinster in her mid-seventies, was somewhat … *odd*. That she had an aversion to people, and not just strangers or any specific type of person, but *people*. She maintained a skeleton staff at her house on Queen Square and for some reason – some reason the Carrolls had yet to reveal to me – she was very important to the English Templars.

Our coachman was excused, and then Hélène was whisked away, perhaps to go and stand awkwardly in a corner of the kitchen and be gawped at by the staff, the poor thing, and then, when it was just the butler and me left, I was led to the drawing room.

We entered a large room with drawn curtains; tall potted plants had been placed in front of the windows, deliberately, I presumed, to limit people looking in or out. Again, it was dingy and dark in the room. Sitting in front of a bimbling fire was the lady of the house, Mademoiselle Jennifer Scott.

'Miss Albertine to see you, my lady,' the butler said and then left without getting a reply, closing the door softly behind him, and leaving me alone with this strange lady who doesn't like people.

What else did I know about her? That her father was the pirate Assassin Edward Kenway and her brother the renowned Templar Grand Master Haytham Kenway. I assumed it was their portraits on one wall: two similar-looking gentlemen, one wearing the robes of an Assassin and another in a military uniform that I took to be Haytham. Jennifer Scott herself had spent years on the

Continent, a victim of the strife between Assassin and Templar. Though no one seemed to know exactly what had happened to her, there was no doubt she had been scarred by her experiences.

I was alone in the room with her. I stood there for some moments, watching her as she sat staring into the flames with her chin in her hand, preoccupied. I was just wondering whether I should clear my throat to get her attention or if perhaps I should simply approach and introduce myself, when the fire came to my rescue. It crackled and popped, startling her so that she appeared to realize where she was, lifting her chin slowly from her hand and looking at me over the rims of her spectacles.

I was told that she had once been a beauty, and truly the ghost of that beauty lingered around her, in features that remained exquisite and dark hair that was slightly unkempt and streaked with thick grey, like a witch. Her eyes were flinty, intelligent and appraising. I stood obediently and let her study me.

'Come forward, child,' she said at last, and indicated the chair opposite.

I took a seat and again was subject to a long stare.

'Your name is Yvonne Albertine?'

'Yes, Mademoiselle Scott.'

'You may call me Jennifer.'

'Thank you, Mademoiselle Jennifer.'

She pursed her lips. 'No, just Jennifer.'

'As you wish.'

'I knew your grandmother and your father,' she said, and then waved her hand. 'Well, I didn't really "know" them as such, but I met them once in a chateau near Troyes in your home country.'

I nodded. The Carrolls had warned me that Jennifer Scott was likely to be suspicious and might try to test me. Here it came, no doubt.

'Your father's name?' prompted Mademoiselle Scott, as though having trouble recalling it.

'Lucio,' I told her.

She raised a finger. 'That's right. That's right. And your grandmother?'

'Monica.'

'Of course, of course. Good people. And how are they now?'

'Passed, I am sad to say. Grandmother some years ago; father in the middle of last year. This visit – the reason I'm here – was one of his final wishes, that I should come to see you.'

'Oh yes?'

'I fear that things ended badly between my father and Mr Kenway, my lady.'

Her face remained impassive. 'Remind me, child.'

‘My father wounded your brother.

‘Of course, of course.’ She nodded. ‘He stuck a sword in Haytham, didn’t he? How could I ever forget?’

You didn’t forget.

I smiled sadly. ‘It was perhaps his biggest regret. He said that shortly before your brother lost consciousness he insisted on leniency for himself for him and grandmother.’

She nodded into her chest, hands grasped. ‘I remember, I remember. Terrible business.’

‘My father regretted it, even at the moment of death.’

She smiled. ‘What a shame he was not able to make the journey to tell me this himself. I would have reassured him that he had nothing to worry about. Many’s the time I wanted to stab Haytham myself.’

She stared into the jumping flames, her voice drifting as she was claimed by her memories. ‘Little squirt. I should have killed him when we were kids.’

‘You can’t mean that …’

She chuckled wryly. ‘No, I don’t suppose I can. And I don’t suppose what happened was Haytham’s fault. Not all of it anyway. She took a deep breath, fumbled for a walking cane that rested by the arm of her chair and stood.

‘Come, you must be tired after your journey from Dover. I shall show you to your room. I’m afraid to say that I am not one for socializing, and especially not when it comes to my evening meal, so you shall have to dine alone, but perhaps tomorrow we can walk the grounds, make each other’s acquaintance?’

I stood and curtsied. ‘I would like that very much,’ I said.

She gave me another look as we left for the bedchambers on the floor above. ‘You look very much like your father, you know,’ she said.

She meant Lucio, of course. I wondered about him, and whether I really did look like him, because one thing I’d realized about Jennifer Scott right away was that she was nobody’s fool.

‘Thank you, my lady.’

iii.

Later, when I had eaten, a meal that I took alone, waited upon by Hélène, I retired to my bedchamber in order to prepare for bed.

The truth was that I hated being fussed over by Hélène. I had long ago drawn the line at allowing her to dress and undress me, but she said she had to do something, just to make all those hours she spent listening to boring gossip below-stairs worthwhile, so I allowed her to lay out my clothes and fetch me a

bowl of warm water for washing. In the evening I let her brush my hair, something I'd come to quite enjoy.

'How's everything going, my lady?' she asked, doing it now, speaking in French but still in a lowered voice.

'Everything is going well, I think. Did you happen to speak to Mademoiselle Scott at all?'

'No, my lady, I saw her in passing and that was all.'

'Well, you didn't miss much. She's certainly an odd character.'

'A strange kettle of fish?'

That was one of Mr Weatherall's expressions. We grinned at each other in the mirror.

'Yes,' I said, 'she certainly is a strange kettle of fish.'

'Am I allowed to know what it is that Mr and Mrs Carroll want with her?'

I sighed. 'Even if I knew, it would be best that you don't.'

'You don't know?'

'Not yet. Which reminds me, what is the time?'

'Just coming up for ten, Mademoiselle Élise.'

I shot her a look, hissing, 'It's *Mademoiselle Yvonne*.'

She blushed. 'I'm sorry, Mademoiselle Yvonne.'

'Just don't do that again.'

'Sorry, Mademoiselle Yvonne.'

'And now I must ask you to leave me.'

iv.

When she had gone, I went to my trunk stored beneath the bed, pulled it out, knelt and flicked the locks. Hélène had emptied it but she wasn't aware of the false bottom. Beneath a fabric tab was a hidden catch and when I clicked it the panel came away to reveal the contents beneath.

Among them was a spyglass and a small signalling device. I fitted the candle to the signal, took the spyglass and went to the window where I opened the curtains just wide enough to look out into Queen Square.

He was across the road. Looking for all the world like a cab driver awaiting a fare, Mr Weatherall sat atop a two-wheeled carriage, the lower half of his face covered with a scarf. I gave the predetermined signal. He used his hand to mask the carriage light, giving his reply and then, with a glance left and right, unwound the headscarf. I brought the spyglass to my eye, so that I was able to see him clearly and lip-read as he said, 'Hello, Élise,' then brought a spyglass to his own eye.

‘Hello,’ I mouthed in return.

Thus we had our silent conversation.

‘How is it going?’

‘I am in.’

‘Good.’

‘Please be careful, Élise,’ he said, and if it was possible to inject real concern and emotion into a lip-reading conversation held in the dead of night then Mr Weatherall managed it.

‘I will be,’ I said. Then I withdrew to sleep and to puzzle over my purpose in this strange place.

6 April 1788

i.

Much time has passed and there is much to tell you about the events of the last few days. My sword has tasted blood for the second time, only this time it was wielded by me. And I have discovered something – something which, reading my journal back, I really should have known all along.

But let's begin at the beginning.

'I wonder if I might be seeing Miss Scott this morning for breakfast?' I'd asked a footman on the morning of our first full day. His eyes darted, then he exited wordlessly, leaving me with alone with the fusty smell of the dining room and a stomach that churned, as it seemed to every morning. The long, empty breakfast table stretched out before me.

Mr Smith the butler materialized in the footman's place, closing the door behind him, then gliding to where I sat with my breakfast.

'I am sorry, mademoiselle,' he said with a short bow, 'but Miss Scott is taking breakfast in her room this morning as is occasionally her custom, especially when she is feeling a little under the weather.'

'Under the weather?'

He smiled thinly. 'An expression meaning not altogether fit and well. She asks that you make yourself at home and hopes that she will join you at some point later today in order to continue making your acquaintance.'

'I should like that very much,' I said.

We waited, Hélène and I. We spent the morning wandering around the mansion, like two people conducting an unusually detailed viewing. There was no sign of Mademoiselle Scott. In the second half of the morning we retired to the drawing room where the years of sewing at the Maison Royale were at last put into practice. There was no still no sign of our host.

And, further, there was not a peep during the afternoon when Hélène and I took a walk around the grounds. She failed to make an appearance at dinner, too, and once again I dined alone.

My annoyance began to grow. When I thought of the risks I had taken getting here – the ugly scenes with Madame Levene, the deception of my father and Arno. My purpose in being here was to find Ruddock, not to spend days struggling to look competent at sewing and being a virtual prisoner of my host – and still no nearer knowing exactly what I was supposed to be doing here.

I retired and then later, at eleven o'clock, signalled Mr Weatherall again.

This time I mouthed to him, 'I'm coming out,' and watched his face register panic as he frantically mouthed back, 'No, no,' but I had already disappeared from the casement, and of course he knew me too well. If I said I was coming out, then I was coming out.

I pulled an overcoat over my nightdress, slipped my feet into slippers, then crept down to the front door. Very, very quietly, I drew back the bolts, then let myself out and darted across the road to his carriage.

'You're taking a big risk, child,' he said crossly, but still, I was pleased to see, unable to hide his pleasure at seeing me.

'I haven't seen her all day,' I told him quickly.

'Really?'

'No, and I've had to spend the entire day wandering around, like a particularly disinterested peacock. Perhaps if I knew what I was supposed to be doing here, then I might have been able to get on with it, complete my mission and leave this awful place.' I looked at him. 'It's bloody torture in there, Mr Weatherall.'

He nodded, suppressing a grin at my use of his English curse word. 'All right, Élise. Well, as it happens, they told me today. You're to recover letters.'

'What sort of letters?'

'The writing sort. Letters written by Haytham Kenway to Jennifer Scott before his death.'

I looked at him. 'Is that it?'

'Isn't that enough? Jennifer Scott is the daughter of an Assassin. The letters were written to her by a high-ranking Templar. The Carrolls want to know what they say.'

'Seems like a fairly long-winded way of finding out.'

'A previous agent placed on to the house staff failed to come up with the goods. All they managed to establish was that wherever the letters were stored it wasn't in some obvious and easy-to-reach place. Miss Scott isn't keeping them in a pretty bow in a writing bureau somewhere. She's hidden them.'

'And in the meantime?'

'Ruddock, you mean? The Carrolls tell me that their people are making enquiries.'

'They assured us they were making enquiries weeks ago.'

‘These things don’t happen quickly.’

‘They’re happening too slowly for my liking.’

‘Élise …’ he warned.

‘It’s all right, I won’t do anything stupid.’

‘Good,’ he said. ‘You’re in a dangerous enough position as it is. Don’t do anything else to make it worse.’

I gave him a peck on the cheek, stepped out of the carriage and dashed back across the road. Letting myself quietly in, I stood for a second, getting my breath – then realized I was not alone.

He stepped out of the gloom, his face in the shadows. Mr Smith the butler. ‘Miss Albertine?’ he said quizzically, head on one side, eyes flashing in the dark, and for a disquieted second I forgot that I was Yvonne Albertine of Troyes.

‘Oh, Mr Smith,’ I spluttered, gathering my overcoat round me. ‘You startled me. I was just –’

‘It’s just Smith,’ he corrected me. ‘Not *Mr S*mith.’

‘I’m sorry, Smith, I –’ I turned and indicated the door – ‘I just needed some air.’

‘Your window is not sufficient, miss?’ he said agreeably, though his face remained in the shadows.

I fought a little wave of irritation, my inner May Carroll outraged that I should be interrogated by a *mere butler*.

‘I wanted more air than that,’ I said rather weakly.

‘Well, that’s quite all right, of course. But, you see, when Miss Scott was just a girl this house was the scene of an attack during which her father was killed.’

I knew this, but nodded anyway as he continued. ‘The family had soldiers on duty and guard dogs, too, but the raiders still managed to gain entrance. The house was badly burned during the attack. Since her return, the mistress has insisted that doors are barred at all hours. While you are, of course, quite welcome to leave the house at any time –’ he gave a short mirthless smile – ‘I must insist that a member of staff be present to ensure the bolts are thrown after your exit and return.’

I smiled. ‘Of course. I quite understand. It won’t happen again.’

‘Thank you. That would be much appreciated.’ His eyes roamed over my clothes, leaving me in no doubt that he considered my garb a little unusual, and then he stepped aside, one hand indicating the stairs.

I left, cursing my own stupidity. Mr Weatherall was right. I should never have taken such a risk.

ii.

The next day was the same. Well, not *exactly* the same, just maddeningly similar. Once again I breakfasted alone; once more I was told that she would see me at some point today and asked to remain in the vicinity of the house. There was more wandering of corridors, more cack-handed sewing, more small talk, not to mention a thrilling turn round the grounds.

There was at least one aspect to our perambulations that had changed for the better. My route was a little more purposeful than before. I found myself wondering where Jennifer might hide the letters. One of the doors off the reception hall led to a games room and I took the opportunity for a quick inspection of the wood panels inside, pondering whether any of them might slide away to reveal a secret compartment beneath. To be honest I needed a more thorough look through the entire house, but it was huge; the letters could have been in any one of two dozen rooms, and after my scare last night I wasn't keen on creeping around after dark. No, my best chance of recovering the letters was getting to know Jennifer.

But how could I do that if she wasn't even leaving her room?

iii.

The same thing happened on the third day. I won't go into it. Just more sewing, small talk, and, 'Oh, I think we'll take the air, Hélène, don't you?'

'I don't like it,' mouthed Mr Weatherall when we liaised that night.

It was difficult to communicate via signals and lip-reading, but it would have to do. He wasn't keen on me sneaking out and, after my encounter with Smith the other night, neither was I.

'What do you mean?'

'I mean they could be checking out your cover story.'

And if they did, would my cover story stand up? Only the Carrolls knew that. I was as much at their mercy as I was a prisoner of Jennifer Scott.

And then, on the fourth day – at last! – Jennifer Scott emerged from her room. I should meet her by the stables, I was told. The two of us were to promenade at Rotten Row in Hyde Park.

When we arrived we joined other midday promenaders. These were men and women who walked together under slightly unnecessary parasols and wrapped up against the chill. The walkers waved to carriages and were awarded with imperious waves in return, while those on horseback waved to the walkers and

the carriage riders, and every man, woman and child was resplendent in their best finery, waving, walking, smiling, more waving …

All apart from Miss Jennifer Scott, who, though she had dressed up for the occasion and wore a stately dress, peered distastefully out at Hyde Park from behind a veil of her grey-streaked hair.

‘Was this the kind of thing you hoped to see when you came to London, Yvonne?’ she asked with a dismissive hand at the wavers, smilers and small children buttoned into suits. ‘Idiots whose horizons barely stretch beyond the walls of the park?’

I suppressed a smile, thinking that she and my mother would have got along. ‘It was you I hoped to see, Mademoiselle Scott.’

‘And why was that again?’

‘Because of my father. His dying wish, remember?’

She pursed her lips. ‘I may seem old to you, Miss Albertine, but I can assure you I’m not so old that I forget things like that.’

‘Forgive me, I meant no offence.’

That dismissive hand again. ‘None taken. In fact, unless I indicate otherwise assume that no offence has been taken. I do not offend easily, Miss Albertine, of that you may be certain.’

I could well believe it.

‘Tell me, what happened to your father and grandmother after they left us that day?’ she asked.

I steeled myself and told the story I had learnt. ‘After your brother was merciful my father and grandmother settled just outside Troyes. It was they who taught me English, Spanish and Italian. Their skills in language and translation became much in demand and they made a good living from the services they offered.’

I paused, searching her face for signs of disbelief. Thanks to my years of woe at the Maison Royale I could just about pass in the languages if she decided to test me.

‘Enough to afford servants?’ she asked.

‘We were fortunate in that regard,’ I said, and in my mind I tried to reconcile the image of the two ‘language experts’ being able to afford a household full of staff, and found that I couldn’t.

Even so, if she had her doubts then she kept them hidden behind those grey, half-lidded eyes.

‘What of your mother?’

‘A local girl. Alas, I never knew her. Shortly after they were married she gave birth to me – but died in childbirth.’

‘And what now? With both your grandmother and your father dead, what will you do when you leave here?’

‘I shall return to Troyes and continue their work.’

There was a long pause. I waved at promenaders.

‘I wonder,’ I said at last, ‘was Mr Kenway in contact with you before his death? Did he write to you, perhaps?’

She gazed from the window but I realized she was looking at her own reflection. I held my breath.

‘He was struck down by his own son, you know,’ she said a little distantly.

‘I see.’

‘Haytham was an expert fighter, like his father,’ she said. ‘Do you know how our father died?’

‘Smith has mentioned it,’ I replied, then added quickly as she shot me a look, ‘by way of explaining the security-conscious nature of the household.’

‘Indeed. Well, Edward – our father – was struck down by our attackers. Of course, the first fight you lose is the one that kills you, and nobody can win every fight, and he was an older man by then. But notwithstanding those facts he had the skills and experience to defeat two other swordsmen. I believe he lost the fight because of an injury he’d sustained years before. It slowed him down. Likewise, Haytham lost a fight against his own son, and I have often wondered why. Was he, like Edward, handicapped by an injury? Was that injury the sword your father pushed into him? Or perhaps Haytham had another sort of handicap? Perhaps Haytham had simply decided that now was his time, and that dying at the hands of his son might be a noble thing to do. Haytham was a Templar, you see. The Grand Master of the Thirteen Colonies no less. But I know something that very few people know about Haytham. Those who have read his journals, perhaps; those who have read his letters …’

The letters. I felt my heart hammering in my chest. The clip-clopping of the horses and the incessant chatter from the promenaders outside seemed to fade into the background as I asked, ‘What was that, Jennifer? What did you know of him?’

‘His *doubts*, my child. His doubts. Haytham had been the subject of indoctrination by his mentor, Reginald Birch, and to all intents and purposes that indoctrination had worked. After all, he ended his life a Templar. Yet he could not help but question what he knew. It was in his nature to do that. And though it’s unlikely that he ever had answers to his questions, the very fact that he had them was enough. Do you have beliefs, Yvonne?’

‘Doubtless I have inherited the values of my parents,’ I replied.

‘Indeed, I expect your manners are impeccable and that you are endlessly considerate of your fellow man …’

‘I try to be,’ I said.

‘How about in more universal issues, Yvonne? Take matters in your home country, for example. Where do your sympathies lie?’

‘I daresay the situation is more complex than a simple allotment of sympathy, Mademoiselle Scott.’

She arched an eyebrow. ‘A very sensible answer, my dear. You strike me as one who is not a born follower.’

‘I like to feel I know my own mind.’

‘I’m sure you do. But tell me, in a little more detail this time, what do you make of the situation in your home country?’

‘I have never given the matter much thought, mademoiselle,’ I protested, not wanting to give myself away.

‘Please, humour me. Give the matter some thought now.’

I thought of home. Of my father, who so fervently believed in a monarch appointed by God, and that every man should know his place; the Crows who wanted to depose the king altogether. And Mother, who believed in a third way.

‘I believe that reform of some kind is needed,’ I told Jennifer.

‘You do?’

I paused. ‘I *think* I do.’

She nodded. ‘Good, good. It is good to have doubts. My brother had doubts. He put them into his letters.’

The letters again. Not sure where this was going, I said, ‘It sounds as though he was a wise man as well as a merciful one.’

She chortled. ‘Oh, he had his faults. But at heart, yes, I think he was a wise man, a good man. Come –’ she tapped the ceiling of the carriage with a handle of her cane – ‘let us return. It is almost time for lunch.’

I was close now, I thought, as we returned to Queen Square. ‘I have something I want to show you before we dine,’ she said as we drove, and I wondered whether it could be the letters.

At the square the coachman helped us down, but then, instead of accompanying us up the steps to the front door, returned to the driver’s seat, shook the reins and was gone, clip-clopping away into a curtain of fine mist that swirled around the wheels of his vehicle.

Then we walked to the door, where Jennifer pulled the bell once, then with two more quick jerks.

And maybe I was being paranoid, but …

The coachman leaving like that. The bell pull. On edge now I kept the smile on my face as bolts were drawn back, the door opened, Jennifer greeting Smith with just the faintest nod before stepping inside.

The front door shut. The soft hum of the square was banished. The now-familiar sense of imprisonment washed over me, except this time mixed with a genuine fear, a sense that things were not right. Where was Hélène? I wondered.

'Perhaps you would be so kind as to let Hélène know I have returned, please, Smith?' I asked the butler.

In return, he inclined his head the usual way and with a smile said, 'Certainly, mademoiselle.' But did not move.

I looked enquiringly at Jennifer. I wanted for things to be normal. For her to chivvy along the butler, but she didn't. She looked at me and said, 'Come, I wish to show you the games room, for it was in there that my father died.'

'Certainly, mademoiselle,' I said, with a sideways look at Smith as we moved over to the wood-panelled door, closed as usual.

'Though I think you've seen the games room, haven't you?' she said.

'During the last four days I have had ample opportunity to view your beautiful property, mademoiselle,' I told her.

She paused with her hand on the doorknob. Looked at me. 'Four days has given us the time we needed, too, *Yvonne* …'

And I didn't like that emphasis. I *really* didn't like that emphasis.

She opened the door and ushered me inside.

The curtains were shut. The only light came from candles placed along ledges and mantelpieces, giving the room a flickering orange glow as though in preparation for some sinister religious ceremony. The billiards table had been covered and moved to one side, leaving the floor bare apart from two wooden kitchen chairs facing each other in the middle of the room. Also, there was a footman who stood with his gloved hands clasped in front of him. Mills, I think his name was. And usually Mills smiled, bowed and was as unfailingly polite and decorous as a member of staff should be to a visiting noblewoman from France. Now, however, he simply stared, his face expressionless. Cruel, even.

Jennifer was continuing. 'Four days gave us the time we needed to send a man to France in order to verify your story.'

Smith had stepped in behind us and stood by the door. I was trapped. How ironic that having spent the last few days moaning about being trapped, now I really was.

'Mademoiselle,' I said, sounding more flustered than I wanted to, 'I must be honest and say I find this whole situation as confusing as I do uncomfortable. If

this is perhaps some practical joke or English custom of which I am unaware, I would ask you please to explain yourself.'

My eyes went to the hard face of Mills the footman, to the two chairs and then back to Jennifer. Her face was impassive. I yearned for Mr Weatherall. For my mother. My father. Arno. I don't think I have ever felt quite so afraid and alone as I did at that moment.

'Do you want to know what our man discovered there?' asked Jennifer. She had ignored my question.

'Madame …' I said in an insistent voice, but still she took no notice.

'He discovered that Monica and Lucio Albertine had indeed been making a living from their language skills, but not enough to afford staff. There was no local girl either. No local girl, no wedding and no children. Certainly not an Yvonne Albertine. Mother and son had lived in modest circumstances on the edge of Troyes – right up until the day they were murdered just four weeks ago.'

iv.

I caught my breath.

'No.' The word was out of me before I had a chance to stop it.

'Yes. I'm afraid so. Your friends the Templars cut their throats as they slept.'

'*No,*' I repeated, my anguish as much for myself – for my fraud laid bare – as it was for poor Monica and Lucio Albertine.

'If you'll excuse me a minute,' said Jennifer, and departed, leaving me under the gaze of Smith and Mills.

She returned. 'It's the letters you want, isn't it? You all but told me on Rotten Row. Why do your Templar masters want my brother's letters? I wonder.'

My thoughts were a jumble. Options raced across my brain: confess, brazen it out, make a break for it, be indignant, break down and cry …

'I'm quite sure I don't know what you're talking about, mademoiselle,' I pleaded.

'Oh I'm quite sure you do, Élise de la Serre.'

Oh God. How did she know that?

But then I had my answer, as in response to a signal from Jennifer, Smith opened the door and another footman entered. He was manhandling Hélène into the room.

She was dumped into one of the wooden chairs, where she sat and regarded me with exhausted, beseeching eyes.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'They told me you were in danger.'

‘Indeed,’ said Jennifer, ‘and neither did we lie, because, in fact, you are both in danger.’

v.

‘Now tell me, what does your Order want with the letters?’

I looked from her to the footmen and knew the situation was hopeless.

‘I’m sorry, Jennifer,’ I told her, ‘I truly am. You’re right, I am an impostor in your home, and you’re right that I hoped to lay my hands on the letters from your brother –’

‘To *take* them from me,’ she corrected tautly.

I hung my head. ‘Yes. Yes, to take them from you.’

She brought two hands to the handle of her cane and leaned towards me. Her hair had fallen over her glasses and the one eye I could see blazed with fury.

‘My father, Edward Kenway, was an Assassin, Élise de la Serre,’ she said. ‘Templar agents attacked my house and killed him in the very room in which you now sit. They kidnapped me, delivering me into a life that even in my most fetid nightmares I could never have imagined for myself. A living nightmare that continued for years. I’ll be honest with you, Élise de la Serre, I’m not best disposed towards Templars, and certainly not Templar spies. What do you suppose is the Assassin punishment for spies, Élise de la Serre?’

‘I don’t know, mademoiselle,’ I implored, ‘but please don’t hurt Hélène. Me, if it pleases you, but not her. She has done nothing. She is an innocent in all of this.’

But now Jennifer gave a short, barked laugh. ‘An innocent? Then I can sympathize with her plight because I, too, was once an innocent.

‘Do you think I deserved everything that happened to me? Kidnapped and kept a prisoner? Used as a whore. Do you think that I, an innocent, deserved to be treated in such a way? Do you think that I, an innocent, deserve to live out the rest of my years in loneliness and darkness, terrified of demons that come in the night?

‘No, I don’t suppose you do. But, you see, innocence is not the shield you wish it to be, not when it comes to the eternal battle between Templar and Assassin. Innocents die in this battle you seem so eager to join, Élise de la Serre. Women and children who know nothing of Assassins and Templars. Innocence dies and innocents die – that is what happens in a war, Élise, and the conflict between Templars and Assassins is no different.’

‘This isn’t you,’ I said at last.

‘What on earth can you mean, child?’

‘I mean you won’t kill us.’

She pulled a face. ‘Why not? An eye for an eye. Men of your stripe slaughtered Monica and Lucio, and they were innocents, too, were they not?’

I nodded.

She straightened. Her knuckles whitened as her fingers flexed on the ivory handle of her cane, and watching her gaze off into space reminded me of when we’d first met, when she’d sat staring into the fire. The painful thing was that in our short time together I’d come to like and admire Jennifer Scott. I didn’t want her to be capable of hurting us. I thought she was better than that.

And she was.

‘The truth is, I hate the bloody lot of you,’ she said at last, exhaling the words at the end of a long sigh as though she’d waited years to say them. ‘I’m sick of you all. Tell that to your Templar friends when I send you and your lady’s maid –’ She stopped and pointed the cane towards Hélène. ‘She’s not really a lady’s maid, is she?’

‘No, mademoiselle,’ I agreed and looked over at Hélène. ‘She thinks she owes me a debt.’

Jennifer rolled her eyes. ‘And now you owe her a debt.’

I nodded gravely. ‘Yes – yes, I do.’

She looked at me. ‘You know, I see good in you, Élise. I see doubts and questions and I think those are positive qualities, and because of that I’ve come to a decision. I’m going to let you have the letters you seek.’

‘I no longer want them, mademoiselle,’ I told her tearfully. ‘Not at any price.’

‘What makes you think you have a choice?’ she said. ‘These letters are what your colleagues in the Templars want, and they shall have them on the condition, firstly, that they leave me out of their battles in future – that they *leave me alone* – and, secondly, that they read them. They read what my brother has to say about how Templar and Assassin can work together and then maybe, just maybe, act upon them.’

She had waved a hand at Smith, who nodded, then moved over to the panels inset into the wall.

She smiled at me. ‘You’d wondered about those panels, hadn’t you? I know you had.’

I avoided her eye. Meantime, Mills had triggered a switch so that one of the panels slid back and taken two cigar boxes from a compartment. Returning to stand beside his mistress he opened the top one to show me what was inside: a sheaf of letters tied with a black ribbon.

Without looking at them she indicated them. ‘Here it is, the sum total of Haytham’s correspondence from America. I want you to read the letters. Don’t

worry, you won't be eavesdropping on any private family matters; we were never close, my brother and I. But what you will find is my brother expanding upon his personal philosophies. And you may find in them – if I have read you correctly, Élise de la Serre – a reason to alter your own thinking. Perhaps take that mode of thinking into your role as a Templar Grand Master.'

She passed the first box back to Mills then opened the second. Inside was a silver necklace. On it hung a pendant inset with sparking red jewels in the shape of a Templar cross.

'He sent me this, too,' she explained. 'A gift. But I have no desire for it. It should go to a Templar. Perhaps one like you.'

'I can't accept this.'

'You have no choice,' she repeated. 'Take them – take them both. Do what you can to bring an end to this fruitless war.'

I looked at her, and though I didn't want to break the spell or change her mind, I couldn't help but ask, 'Why are you doing this?'

'Because there has been enough blood spilt,' she said, turning smartly away as though she could no longer bear to look at me – as though she was ashamed of the mercy she felt in her soul and wished she were strong enough to have me killed.

And then with a gesture she ordered her men to carry Hélène away, telling me when I looked like I might protest, 'She will be looked after.'

Jennifer continued, 'Hélène didn't want to talk, because she was protecting you. You should be proud to inspire such loyalty in your followers, Élise. Perhaps you can use those gifts to inspire your Templar associates in other ways. We shall see. These letters are not given lightly. I can only hope that you read them and take note of the contents.'

She gave me two hours with them. It was enough time to read them and form questions of my own. To know that there was another way. A third way.

vi.

Jennifer did not bid us goodbye. Instead we were shown out of a rear entrance and into the stable yard where a carriage had been asked to wait. Mills loaded us inside and we left without another word.

The coach rattled and shook. The horses snorted, their bridles jangled as we made our way across London and towards Mayfair. In my lap I carried the box, inside it Haytham's letters and the necklace I had been given by Jennifer. I held them tight, knowing that they provided the key to future dreams of peace. I owed it to her to see that they fell into the right hands.

By my side Hélène sat silent. I reached for her, fingertips stroking the back of her hand as I tried to reassure her.

‘Sorry I got you into this,’ I said.

‘You didn’t get me into anything, mademoiselle, remember? You tried to talk me out of coming.’

I gave a mirthless chuckle. ‘I expect you wish you’d done as I’d asked now.’

She gazed from the glass as the city streets tumbled past as. ‘No, mademoiselle, not for a second did I wish otherwise. Whatever is my fate it is better than what those men had planned for me in Calais. The ones you saved me from.’

‘In any case, Hélène, the debt is paid. When we reach France you must go your own way, as a free woman.’

The ghost of a smile stole across her lips. ‘We shall see about that, mademoiselle,’ she said. ‘We shall see.’

As the carriage trundled into the tree-lined square at Mayfair I saw activity outside the home of the Carrolls some fifty yards away.

I called to the driver to stop by banging on the ceiling hatch and as the horses complained and stamped, I opened the carriage door and stood on the running board, shielding my eyes to look towards the distance. There I saw two carriages. The footmen of the Carroll household were milling around. I saw Mr Carroll standing on on the steps of the house, pulling on a pair of gloves. I saw Mr Weatherall come trotting down the steps, buttoning his jacket. At his side hung his sword.

That was interesting. The footmen were armed, too, and so was Mr Carroll.

‘Wait here,’ I called to the driver, then peered inside.

‘I’ll be back soon,’ I said to Hélène softly and then, picking up my skirts, I hurried to a spot near a set of railings from which I could see the carriages more closely. Mr Weatherall stood with his back to me. I cupped my hands to my mouth, made our customary owl sound and was relieved when only he turned round, everybody else too embroiled in their tasks to wonder why they could hear an owl at that time of the early evening.

Mr Weatherall’s eyes searched the square until they found me and he shifted position, drawing his hands across his chest, assuming a casual pose as, with a hand covering one side of his mouth and the side of his face, he mouthed to me, ‘What the hell are you doing here?’

Thank God for our lip-reading conversations.

‘Never mind that. Where are you going?’

‘They found Ruddock. He’s staying at the Boar’s Head Inn on Fleet Street.’

‘I need my things,’ I told him. ‘My trunk.’

He nodded. ‘I’ll fetch it and leave it in one of the stables round the back. Don’t hang around; we’re leaving any moment now.’

All my life I’ve been told I’m beautiful, but I don’t think I’d ever really used it until then, when I returned to our carriage, fluttered my eyelashes at the coachman and persuaded him to fetch my trunk from the mews.

When he returned I asked him to sit up top while, with a feeling like greeting an old friend, I delved into my trunk. My proper trunk. The trunk of Élise de la Serre rather than Yvonne Albertine. I performed my customary carriage change. Off came the accursed dress. I slapped Hélène’s hands away as she tried to help then slipped into my breeches and shirt, pummelled my tricorn into shape and strapped on my sword. I shoved a sheaf of letters into the front of my shirt. Everything else I left in the carriage.

‘You’re to take this carriage to Dover,’ I told Hélène, opening the door. ‘You’re to go. Meet the tide. Take the first ship back to France. God willing, I will meet you there.’

I called up to the driver. ‘Take this girl to Dover,’ I called up at him.

‘Is she sailing to Calais?’ he asked, having performed the usual double-take at my change of clothes.

‘As am I. You’re to wait for me there.’

‘Then she might catch the tide. The road to Dover is full of coaches right now.’

‘Excellent,’ I said, and tossed him a coin. ‘Be sure to look after her, and know that if any harm should come to her I’ll come looking for you.’

His eyes went to my sword. ‘I believe you,’ he said. ‘Don’t you worry about that.’

‘Good,’ I grinned. ‘Then we understand each other.’

‘Seems like we do.’

Right.

I took a deep breath.

I had the letters. I had my sword and a pouch of coins. Everything else went with Hélène.

The coachman found me another carriage, and as I climbed in I watched Hélène pull away, and silently offered up a prayer for her safe delivery. To my coachman I said, ‘Fleet Street, please, monsieur, and don’t spare the horses.’

With a smile he nodded, and we were in motion. I slid down the window and looked behind us just in time to see the last of the Carroll party board the coaches. Whips split the air. The two carriages moved off. Through the hatch I called, ‘Monsieur, there are two coaches some distance behind. We must reach Fleet Street ahead of them.’

‘Yes, mademoiselle,’ said the driver, unperturbed. He shook the reins. The horses whinnied and their hooves clattered more urgently upon the cobbles as I sat back with my hand gripping the hilt of my sword, and knew that the chase was on.

vii.

It wasn’t long before we were pulling into the Boar’s Head Inn on Fleet Street. I tossed coins and gave a grateful wave to the coachman and then, before he had time to open my door, jumped out into the courtyard.

It was full of stagecoaches and horses, and ladies and gentlemen directing lackeys who groaned beneath the weight of parcels and trunks. I glanced at the entranceway. There was no sign of the Carrolls. Good. It gave me a chance to find Ruddock. I slipped into the back door then along a half-dark passage into the tavern itself, which was dark with low wooden beams. Like the Antlers in Calais, it was alive with the jagged laughter of thirsty travellers, the air thick with smoke. I found a barkeeper who stood with his mouth hidden in his jowls, half asleep and working a towel round a pewter tumbler, eyes faraway, as though dreaming of a better place.

‘Hello? Monsieur?’

Still he stared. I flicked my fingers, called him even more loudly over the din of the tavern and he came to.

‘What?’ he growled.

‘I’m looking for a man who stays here, a Mr Ruddock.’

His jowls and the folds of skin at his neck shuddered as he shook his head no. ‘Nobody here by that name.’

‘Perhaps he is using a false name,’ I said hopefully. ‘Please, monsieur, it is important that I find him.’

He squinted at me with renewed interest. ‘What does he look like, this Mr Ruddock of yours?’ he asked me.

‘He dresses like a doctor, monsieur, at least he did the last time I saw him, but one thing he can’t change is the distinctive shade of his hair.’

‘Almost pure white?’

‘That’s it.’

‘No, not seen ’im.’

Even in the thick clamour of the inn I could hear it – a disturbance in the courtyard. The sound of carriages arriving. It was the Carrolls.

The innkeeper had seen me notice. His eyes glittered.

‘You *have* seen him,’ I pressed.

‘Might have,’ he said and with unwavering eyes held out a hand. I crossed his palm with silver.

‘Upstairs. First room on the left. He’s using the name Mowles. Mr Gerald Mowles. Sounds like you’d better hurry.’

The commotion from outside had increased and I could only hope they’d take their time assembling and helping Mrs Carroll and her hideous daughter out of the carriage before they swept into the Boar’s Head Inn like minor royalty, giving me plenty of time to …

Get upstairs. First door on the left. I caught my breath. I was in the eaves, the slanting beams almost brushing the top of my hat. Even so it was quieter upstairs, the noise from below reduced to a constant background clatter, no hint of the impending invasion.

I took the few moments of calm before the storm to compose myself, raised my hand, about to knock, then had second thoughts and instead crouched to peer through the keyhole.

He sat on the bed with one leg pulled up beneath him, wearing breeches and a shirt unlaced to show a bony chest tufted with hair. Though he no longer looked like a doctor, there was no mistaking the shock of white hair and the fact that it was definitely him, the man who had populated my nightmares. Funny how this terror of my childhood now looked very unthreatening indeed.

From downstairs came the sound of a minor uproar as the Carrolls burst in. There were raised voices and threats and I heard my friend the innkeeper protesting as they made their presence felt. In moments Ruddock would be aware of what was happening and any element of surprise I had would be lost.

I knocked.

‘Enter,’ he called, which surprised me.

As I came into the room he raised himself to meet me with one hand on his hip, a stance I realized with a puzzled start was supposed to be provocative. For a second or so we were both confused by the sight of one another: him, posing with his hand on his hip; me, bursting in.

Until at last he spoke in a voice that I was surprised to hear was cultured. ‘I’m sorry, but you don’t look much like a prostitute. I mean, no offence, and you’re most attractive, but just not much like a … prostitute.’

I frowned at him. ‘No, monsieur, I am not a prostitute, I am Élise de la Serre, daughter of Julie de la Serre.’

He looked at once blank and quizzical.

‘You tried to kill us,’ I explained.

His mouth formed an O.

viii.

‘Ah,’ he said, ‘and you’re the grown-up daughter come to take revenge, are you?’

My hand was on the hilt of my sword. From behind I heard the rattle of boots on wooden steps as the Carrolls’ men made their way upstairs. I slammed the door and threw the bolt.

‘No. I’m here to save your life.’

‘Oh? Really? That’s a turn-up.’

‘Count yourself lucky,’ I said. The footsteps were just outside the door. ‘Leave.’

‘But I’m not even dressed properly.’

‘*Leave*,’ I insisted, and pointed at the window. There was banging on the door, which shook in its frame, and Ruddock didn’t need telling a third time. He slung one leg over the casement and disappeared, leaving a strong whiff of stale sweat behind, and I heard him skidding down the sloped roof outside. Just then the door splintered and swung open, and the Carrolls’ men burst inside.

There were three of them. I drew my sword and they drew theirs. Behind them came Mr Weatherall and the three Carrolls.

‘Stop,’ called Mr Carroll. ‘For God’s sake, it’s Mademoiselle de la Serre.’

I stood with my back to the window, the room crowded with people now, swords drawn. From behind I heard a clatter as Ruddock made his way to safety.

‘Where is he?’ asked Mr Carroll, though not with the urgent tones I might have expected.

‘I don’t know,’ I told them. ‘I came looking for him myself.’

At a gesture from Mr Carroll, the three swordsmen stood down. Carroll looked confused. ‘I see. You’re here looking for Mr Ruddock. But I thought *we* were the ones supposed to be looking for Mr Ruddock. Indeed, I was of the understanding that while we were doing that, you would at the home of Jennifer Scott attending to business there. Very important Templar business, yes?’

‘That’s exactly what I have been doing,’ I told him.

‘I see. Well, first, why don’t you put your sword away? There’s a good girl.’

‘It’s because of what I learnt from Jennifer Scott that my sword stays unsheathed.’

He raised an eyebrow. Mrs Carroll curled a lip and May Carroll sneered. Mr Weatherall shot me a be-careful look.

‘I see. Something you were told by Jennifer Scott, the daughter of the Assassin Edward Kenway?’

‘Yes,’ I said. My colour rose.

‘And do you plan to tell us what this woman, an enemy of the Templars, told you about us?’

‘That you arranged for Monica and Lucia to be killed.’

Mr Carroll gave a short, sad shrug. ‘Ah, well, that is true, I’m afraid. A necessary precaution, in order that the subterfuge should not lack veracity.’

‘I would never have agreed to take part had I known.’

Mr Carroll spread his hands as though my reaction were a vindication of their actions. The point of my short sword stayed steady. I could run him through – run him through in an instant.

But if I did that I’d be dead before his body even hit the floor.

‘How did you know to come here?’ he said, with a look at Mr Weatherall, realizing, surely, what the truth of it was. I saw Mr Weatherall’s fingers flex, ready to reach for his sword.

‘That doesn’t matter,’ I said. ‘The important thing is that you upheld your end of the bargain.’

‘Indeed we did,’ he agreed, ‘but did you uphold yours?’

‘You asked me to recover some letters from Jennifer Scott. It was at great cost to myself and my lady’s maid, Hélène, but I have managed to do it.’

He shared a look with his wife and daughter. ‘You did?’

‘Not only that, but I’ve read the letters.’

His lips downturned as though to say, ‘Yes? And?’

‘I’ve read the letters and taken note of what Haytham Kenway had to say. And what he had to say involved the worlds of Assassin and Templar ceasing hostilities. Haytham Kenway – a legend among Templars – had a vision for the future of our two orders and it was that they should work together.’

‘I see,’ said Mr Carroll, nodding, ‘and that meant something to you, did it?’

‘Yes,’ I said, suddenly sure of it. ‘Yes. Coming from him it meant something.’

He nodded. ‘Indeed. Indeed. Haytham Kenway was … *brave* to put these ideas on paper. Had he been discovered he would have been tried for treachery by the Order.’

‘But he may well be right. We can learn from his writings.’

Mr Carroll was nodding. ‘Quite so, my dear. We can. Indeed, I shall be very interested to see what he had to say. Tell me, do you by any chance have the letters with you?’

‘Yes,’ I said carefully. ‘Yes, I do.’

‘Oh, jolly good. That’s jolly good. Could I by any chance see them, please?’

His hand was held out, palm up. Beyond it a smile that went nowhere near his eyes.

I reached into my shirt, took the sheaf of letters from where they pressed against my breast and handed them to him.

‘Thank you,’ he said, still smiling, his eyes never leaving mine as he passed the letters to his daughter, who took them, a smile spreading across her face. I knew what was going to happen next. I was ready for it. Sure enough, May Carroll tossed the letters on to the fire.

‘*No,*’ I shouted, and sprang forward, but not to the fire as they expected, but to the side of Mr Weatherall, elbowing one of the Carrolls’ strong-arms as I pushed him away. The man gave a cry of pain, brought his sword to bear, and the sound of ringing steel was suddenly deafening in the tiny lodging room as our blades met.

At the same time Mr Weatherall drew his sword and deftly fended off the second of the Carrolls’ men.

‘*Stop,*’ ordered Mr Carroll, and the skirmish was over. Mr Weatherall and I, our backs to the window, faced the three Carroll swordsmen, all five of us breathing heavily, blazing eyes on each other.

With a tight voice Mr Carroll said, ‘Please remember, gentlemen, that Mademoiselle de la Serre and Mr Weatherall are still our guests.’

I didn’t feel much like a guest. By my side the fire flared then died, the letters reduced to grey, fluttering sheets of ash. I checked my stance: feet apart, centre balanced, breathing steady. My elbows bent and close to the body. I kept the nearest swordsman on point and maintained eye contact while Mr Weatherall covered another one. The third? Well, he was a floater.

‘Why?’ I said to Mr Carroll, without taking my eyes off the nearest swordsman, my partner for this dance. ‘Why did you burn the letters?’

‘Because there can be no truce with the Assassins, Élise.’

‘Why not?’

With his head slightly on one side and his hands clasped in front of him, he smiled condescendingly. ‘You don’t understand, my dear. Our kind have warred with the Assassins for centuries …’

‘Exactly,’ I pressed, ‘and that is why it should stop.’

‘Hush, my dear,’ he said and his patronizing tone set my teeth on edge. ‘The divisions between our two orders are too great, the enmity too entrenched. You might as well ask a snake and a mongoose to take afternoon tea together. Any truce would be conducted in an atmosphere of mutual distrust and the airing of ancient grievances. Each would suspect the other of plotting to overthrow them. It would never happen. Yes, we will prevent any attempts to spread the promotion of such ideas –’ he wafted a hand at the fire – ‘whether they be the

writings of Haytham Kenway, or the aspirations of a naive young girl destined to be the French Grand Master one day.'

The full impact of what he meant hit me. 'Me? You mean to kill me?'

Head on one side, he looked at me with sad eyes. 'It is for the greater good.'

I bristled. 'But I am a Templar.'

He pulled a face. 'Well, not quite yet, of course, but I understand your meaning and admit that does affect matters. Just not quite enough. The simple fact is that things must stay as they are. Don't you remember that from when we first met?'

My eyes shifted to May Carroll. Her purse dangled from her gloved fingers, and she watched us as though enjoying a night at the theatre.

'Oh, I remember our first meeting very well,' I told Mr Carroll. 'I remember my mother giving you very short shrift.'

'Indeed,' he said. 'Your mother had progressive tendencies not in line with our own.'

'One might almost think you would want her dead,' I said.

Mr Carroll looked confused. 'I beg your pardon?'

'Perhaps you wanted her dead enough to hire a man to do the job. A disenfranchised Assassin perhaps?'

He clapped his hands with understanding. 'Oh, I see. You mean the recently departed Mr Ruddock?'

'Exactly.'

'And you think we were the ones who hired him? You think we were the ones behind the attempted assassination? And that, presumably, is why you have just helped Mr Ruddock escape?'

I felt myself colour, realizing I had given myself away as Mr Carroll clapped his hands together again. 'Well, weren't you?'

'Much as I hate to disappoint you, my dear, but that particular action was nothing to do with us.'

Silently I cursed. If he was telling the truth then I'd made a mistake letting Ruddock go. They had no reason to kill him.

'So you see our problem, Élise,' Mr Carroll was saying, 'for now you are a lowly Templar knight with fanciful notions. But you will one day be Grand Master and you have not one but two key principles in opposition to our own. Letting you leave England is out of the question, I'm afraid.'

His hand went to the hilt of his sword. I tensed, trying to get a sense of the odds: me and Mr Weatherall versus three Carroll strong-arms, as well as the three Carrolls themselves.

They were terrible odds.

‘May,’ Mr Carroll said, ‘would you like to do the honours? You can be blooded at last.’

She smiled obsequiously at her father, and I realized that she was the same as me: she’d been trained in swordsmanship but had yet to kill. I was to be her first. What an honour.

From behind her, Mrs Carroll proffered a sword, a short sword like my own, custom-built for her size and weight. The light gleamed from an ornate curved hand guard, the sword handed to her as though it were some kind of religious artefact, and she turned in order to take it. ‘Are you ready for this, Smell-bag?’ she said as she turned.

Oh yes, I was ready. Mr Weatherall and my mother had always told me that all sword fights begin in the mind and that most end with the first blow. It was all about who made the first move.

So I made it. I danced forward and rammed the point of my sword through the back of May Carroll’s neck and out through her mouth.

First blood was to me. Not exactly the most honourable killing but, at that very moment in time, honour was the last thing on my mind. I was more interested in staying alive.

ix.

It was the last thing they’d expected, to see their daughter impaled on my sword. I saw Mrs Carroll’s eyes widen in disbelief in the half-second before she screamed in shock and anguish.

Meanwhile, I’d used my forward motion to shoulder-charge Mr Carroll, yanking my sword from May Carroll’s neck and hitting him with such force that he pinwheeled back off-balance and splayed into the doorway. May Carroll had sunk, dead before she hit the floor, painting it with her blood; Mrs Carroll was rooting in her purse but I ignored her. Finding my feet, I crouched and spun in anticipation of an attack from behind.

It came. The swordsman lumbering towards me had a look of startled disbelief plastered across his face, unable to believe the sudden turn of events. I stayed low and met his sword with my blade, fending off his attack and pivoting at the same time, taking his feet from him with an outflung leg so that he crashed to the floor.

There was no time to finish him. By the window Mr Weatherall was battling but he was struggling. I saw it in his face, a look of impending defeat and confusion, as though he couldn’t understand why his two opponents were still standing. As if this had never happened before.

I drove one of his assailants through. The second man pulled away in surprise, finding he suddenly had two opponents rather than one, but with the first swordsman pulling himself to his feet, Mr Carroll up and reaching for his sword, and Mrs Carroll at last freeing something from her purse, which turned out to be a tiny three-barrel turnover pistol, I decided I'd pushed my luck far enough.

It was time to go the same way as my friend Mr Ruddock.

'The window,' I shouted, and Mr Weatherall threw me a look that said, 'You must be joking,' before I put two hands to his chest and pushed so that he tumbled bottom first out of the window and on to the sloped roof outside.

Just as I did there was a crack, the sound of a ball making contact with something soft and, in the window, a soft spray of blood, like a red lace sheet suddenly drawn across it, and even as I wondered whether the sound I had heard was the ball hitting me, or if the haze of blood in the window was mine, I hurled myself through the opening, smacked on to the tiles on the other side and slid on my stomach to Mr Weatherall, who had come to a halt on the lip of the roof.

I saw now that the ball had hit his lower leg, the blood staining his breeches dark. His boots scrabbled on the tiles, which loosened and fell into the yard, accompanied by the sound of shouts and running feet below. There came a cry from above us and a head appeared at the window. I saw the face of Mrs Carroll contorted with anguish and fury, her need to kill the woman who killed her daughter overriding everything else in her life – including the need to remove herself from the casement so her men could get through and come after us.

Instead she waved the turnover pistol at us. With a snarl and bared teeth she aimed it at me and surely couldn't miss unless she was jostled from behind …

Which was exactly what happened. Her shot was as wild as it was wide, pinging harmlessly off the tiles to our side.

Later, as we raced towards Dover in a horse and carriage, Mr Weatherall would tell me that it was common for a barrel of a turnover pistol to ignite the other barrels, and that 'it could be nasty' for whoever it was doing the firing.

That's precisely what happened to Mrs Carroll. I heard a fizzing then a popping sound and the pistol came skidding down the roof towards us while up above Mrs Carroll screamed as her hand, now a shade of red and black, began to bleed.

I took the opportunity to heave Mr Weatherall's good leg off the side of the roof. He hung on by his fingertips, screwing his face up in pain but refusing to scream as I manhandled his other leg over, then shouted, 'Sorry about this,' as I clambered over him and dangling we jumped to the courtyard below, scattering onlookers.

It was a short drop, but even so it knocked the wind out of us, sweat popping on Mr Weatherall's face as he chewed back the pain of his shot leg. As he stood I commandeered a horse and carriage, and then he limped to take his place beside me.

It all happened in a moment. We thundered out of the courtyard and into Fleet Street. I glanced up and saw faces at the window of the guest room. They would be after us soon, I knew, and I drove the horses as hard as I dared, silently promising them a tasty snack when we reached Dover.

In the end, it took us six hours, and I could at least thank God that there was no sign of the Carrolls behind us on the route. In fact, I didn't see them until we had pushed off Dover beach in a rowing boat, making our way towards the packet, which, we'd been told, was about to weigh anchor.

Our oarsman grunted as he pulled us closer to the larger vessel, and I watched as two coaches arrived on the coast road at the top of the beach. We were drawing away and, with no light of our own, the vessel was swallowed up by the ink-black sea, the oarsmen guided by the light of the packet, so the Carrolls couldn't see us from the shore. But we were able to see them, indistinct but illuminated by their swinging lanterns as they scurried about in search of their quarry.

I couldn't see Mrs Carroll's face but could imagine the mix of hatred and grief she wore like a mask. Mr Weatherall, barely awake, his wounded leg hidden beneath travel blankets, watched. He saw me do a discreet *bras d'honneur* and nudged me.

'Even if they could see you they wouldn't know what you were doing. It's only rude in France. Here, try this.' He stuck up two fingers so I did the same.

The hull of the packet was not far away now. I could feel its bulky presence in the night.

'They'll come after you, you know,' he said, his chin tucked into his chest. 'You killed their daughter.'

'Not just that. I've still got their letters.'

'The ones that got burned were a decoy?'

'Some of my letters to Arno.'

'Perhaps they'll never find out about that. Either way, they'll come after you.'

They had been swallowed up by the night. England now just a mass of land, the huge moon-dappled cliffs to our left.

'I know,' I told him, 'but I'll be ready for them.'

'Just make sure you are.'

9 April 1788

‘I need your help.’

It was raining. The sort of rain that feels like knives on your skin, that batters your eyelids and pummels your back. It had plastered my hair to my head, and when I spoke the water spouted off my mouth, but at least it disguised the tears and snot as I stood on the steps of the Maison Royale at Saint-Cyr, trying not to fall over from sheer exhaustion, and watched Madame Levene’s face pale from the shock of seeing me, as though I were a ghost appearing on the steps of the school in the dead of night.

And standing there, with the carriage behind me, Mr Weatherall asleep or unconscious inside, and Hélène looking anxiously from the window, gaping through the sluicing rain to where I stood on the steps of the school, I wondered if I was doing the right thing.

And, for a second, as Madame Levene took in the sight of me, I thought she might simply tell me to go to hell for all the trouble I’d caused and slam the door in my face. And if she did that, then who could blame her?

‘I’ve got nowhere else to go,’ I said. ‘Please help me.’

And she didn’t slam the door in my face. She said, ‘My dear, of course.’

And I dropped into her arms, half dead with fatigue.

10 April 1788

Was ever a man more brave than Mr Weatherall? Not once had he shouted out in pain on the journey to Dover, but by the time we boarded the packet he had lost a lot of blood. I met Hélène aboard, the Dover cliffs shrinking in the distance, my time in London becoming a memory already, and we had laid Mr Weatherall on a section of the deck where we had a little privacy.

Hélène knelt by him, placing cool hands to his forehead.

'You're an angel,' he said, with a smile up at her, then slipped into unconsciousness.

We bandaged him as best we could, and by the time we reached the shores of Calais he had recovered some of his colour. But he was still in pain, and as far as we knew the ball remained inside his leg, and when we changed his dressings the wound gleamed at us, showing no sign of healing.

The school had a nurse but Madame Levene had fetched the doctor from Châteaufort, a man experienced in dealing with war wounds.

'It's going to have to come off, ain't it?' Mr Weatherall had said to him from the bed, five of us crammed into his bedchamber.

The doctor nodded and I felt my tears prick my eyes.

'Don't you worry about it,' Mr Weatherall was saying. 'I knew the bloody thing was going to have to come off, right from the second she got me. Sliding on the bloody roof in me own blood, musket ball stuck in me leg, I thought, "That's it – it's a goner." Sure enough.'

He looked at the doctor and swallowed, a little fear showing on his face at last. 'Are you fast?'

The doctor nodded, adding with a slightly proud air, 'I can do a leg in forty-four seconds.'

Mr Weatherall looked impressed. 'You use a serrated blade?'

'Razor-sharp …'

Mr Weatherall took a deep, regretful breath. 'Then what are we waiting for?' he said. 'Let's get it over with.'

Jacques, the illegitimate son of the headmistress, and I held Mr Weatherall, and the doctor was as good as his word, being fast and thorough, even when Mr

Weatherall passed out from the pain. When it was over he wrapped Mr Weatherall’s leg in brown paper and took it away, and the following day returned with a pair of crutches.

2 May 1788

To keep up appearances, I returned to school, where I was very much a mystery to my classmates, who were told that I had been segregated for disciplinary reasons. For these last few months I would be the most talked-about pupil at school, subject of more rumours and gossip than I care to mention: on the grapevine I heard that I had taken up with a gentleman of ill repute (not true), that I had fallen with child (not true), and that I had taken to spending my nights gambling in dockside bars (and, well, yes, I had done that, once or twice).

None of them guessed that I had been trying to track down a man who was once hired to kill me and my mother, that I had returned with an injured Mr Weatherall and a devoted Hélène, and that the three of us now lived in the groundsman's lodge with Jacques.

No, nobody ever guessed that.

I read Haytham Kenway's letters again and then, one day, I wrote to Jennifer Scott. I told her how sorry I was. I 'introduced' myself, telling her about my home life, about Arno, my beloved, and how I was supposed to steer him away from the creed and towards the ways of Templars.

And of course I discussed Haytham's letters and how his words had moved me. I told her that I would do everything I could to help broker peace between our two kinds, because she was right, and Haytham was right: there had been too much killing, and it had to stop.

6 December 1788

This evening Mr Weatherall and I took the cart into Châteaufort, and a house there he called his ‘drop’.

‘You’re a more agreeable coachman than young Jacques, I must say,’ he’d said, settling in at my side. ‘Although I’ll say this, he’s a cracking horseman. Never needs to use the whip and rarely even touches the reins. Just sits there on the shaft with his feet up, whistling through his teeth, like this …’

He whistled in an approximation of his usual coachman. Well, I was no Jacques, and my hands froze on the reins but I enjoyed the scenery as we rode. Winter had begun to bite hard and the fields on either side of the track into town were laced with ice that glimmered beneath a low skirt of early evening fog. It would be another bad winter, that was for certain, and I wondered how the peasants who worked the fields felt, looking from their windows. My privilege allowed me to see the beauty ushered into the landscape. They would see only hardship.

‘What’s a “drop”?’ I asked him.

‘Aha,’ he laughed, slapping his gloved hands together, his cold breath clouding around his upturned collar. ‘Ever seen a dispatch arrive to the lodge? No. That’s because they come from here.’ He pointed up the highway. ‘A drop is how I can conduct my business without giving away my exact location. The official story is that you’re completing your education and I’m whereabouts unknown. That’s how I want things to remain for the time being. And to do that I have to route my correspondence through a series of contacts.’

‘And who are the people you’re hoping to hoodwink. The Crows?’

‘Could be. Don’t know yet, do we? We’re still no closer to finding out who hired Ruddock.’

There was an awkward moment between us. Almost everything about the trip to London had remained unspoken, but most of all the fact that it had achieved little of real worth. Yes, I now had the letters and had returned a different, more enlightened woman, but the fact was that we’d gone there to find Ruddock and had done nothing of the sort.

Well, we had found him. Only, I had let him go. And the sole pieces of information we had from the experience were that Ruddock no longer dressed like a doctor, and that he sometimes went under the alias Gerald Mowles.

'He won't be using that alias again, will he? He'd have to be a bloody idiot to try that again,' Mr Weatherall had grunted, which reduced the pieces of information I had to one.

Plus, of course, I had killed May Carroll.

Over the kitchen table at the lodge we had discussed how the Carrolls might respond. For a month or so, Mr Weatherall had monitored the dispatches and found no mention of the incident.

'I didn't think they'd want to make it official business,' Mr Weatherall had said. 'Fact is, they were about to bump off the Grand Master's daughter, herself a Grand Master in waiting. Try explaining that one. No. The Carrolls will want their revenge, but they'll take it the clandestine way. They'll want you, me, and maybe even Hélène dead. And sooner or later, probably just when we least expect it, someone will pay us a visit.'

'We'll be ready for them,' I told him. But I remembered the battle in the Boar's Head Inn, when Mr Weatherall had been a shadow of his former self. The drink, the advancing years, a loss of confidence – whatever the reason, he was no longer the great warrior he'd been. And now, of course, he'd lost a leg. I'd been training with him, and while he'd continued coaching me in swordsmanship, for his own part he had begun to concentrate more on his knife-throwing skills.

We were greeted by the sight of the three castles of Châteaufort, and in the square I climbed down, collected Mr Weatherall's crutches and helped him out.

He led us to a shop in one corner of the square.

'A cheese shop?' I said, eyebrows arching.

'Poor old Jacques can't stand the smell of it; I have to leave him outside. You coming in?'

I grinned and followed as he bowed his head and removed his hat, stepping inside. He greeted a young girl behind the counter, then moved through to the rear. Resisting the urge to hold a hand over my mouth I followed to find him surrounded by wooden shelves on which were wheels of cheese. His nose was raised as he enjoyed the scent of the pungent cheese fumes.

'You smell that?' he asked.

I could hardly miss it. 'This is the drop, is it?'

'Indeed it is. If you look beneath that cheese there, you may find some correspondence for us.'

It was a single letter that I handed to him. I waited as he read it.

‘Right,’ he said, when he’d finished, folding the letter and tucking it into his greatcoat. ‘You know how I said that our friend Mr Ruddock would have to be bloody stupid to use his Gerald Mowles identity again?’

‘Yes,’ I said cautiously, feeling a little tingle of excitement at the same time.

‘Well, he is – he’s bloody stupid.’

12 January 1789

It was dark and smoky in the Butchered Cow, as I imagine it always was, and the gloom was oppressive, despite the noise of the place. You know what it reminded me of? The Antlers in Calais. Only the Antlers in Calais removed to the harsh fields and even harsher living conditions of the fields of Rouen.

I was right. Winter had bit hard. Harder than ever.

The smell of ale seemed to hang about the damp boards like mist; it was ingrained in the walls and in the woodwork, and the tables at which the drinkers sat stank of it – not that they minded. Some were hunched over their tankards, so low that the brims of their hats were almost touching the tabletops, talking in low voices and whiling the evening away with grumbles and gossip; others were in groups, rattling dice in cups or laughing and joking. They banged their empty tankards on the table and called for more ale, brought to them by the only woman in the room, a smiling barmaid who was as practised at dispensing ale as she was at dancing out of the way of the men's grabbing hands.

It was into this tavern that I went, escaping a biting wind that whistled and swirled about me as I heaved the door shut and stood for a second on the threshold, stamping the snow off my boots.

I wore robes that almost reached the floor, a hood pulled up to hide my face. The loud chatter in the tavern was suddenly hushed, replaced instead by a low murmur. The brims of hats dipped lower; the men watched as I turned, closed the door, then stood in the shadows for a moment.

I moved across the room, boots clacking on the boards, to a counter where stood the barkeeper, the barmaid and two regulars clutching tankards, one of them regarding the floor, the other watching with flinty eyes and a set mouth.

At the counter I reached for my hood and drew it back to reveal red hair that I shook loose a little. The barmaid pursed her lips a little, and almost reflexively her hands went to her hips and her chest wiggled a little.

I looked carefully around the room, letting them know I was not at all intimidated by my surroundings. The men regarded me back with watchful eyes, no longer studying the tabletops, fascinated and entranced by the new arrival.

Some licked their lips and there was much nudging, some sniggers. Ribald remarks were exchanged.

I took it all in, and then I turned to give the room my back, moving up to the counter, where one of the regulars shifted to let me in. The other one, however, remained where he was, so that he was standing close to me, deliberately looking me up and down.

'Good evening,' I said to the barman. 'I'm hoping you might be able to help me – I'm looking for a man.' I said it loudly enough for the entire tavern to hear.

'Looks like you've come to the right place then,' rasped the potato-nosed drinker by my side, although he said it to the room, which roared with laughter.

I smiled and ignored him. 'He goes by the name of Bernard,' I added. 'He has some information I require. I was told I might find him here.'

All eyes turned to a corner of the tavern, where Bernard sat, his eyes wide,

'Thank you,' I said. 'Bernard, perhaps we could step outside for a moment in order that we can talk.'

Bernard stared but didn't move.

'Come on, Bernard, I won't bite.'

Then Potato-Nose stepped away from the counter so that he was in front of me, facing me. His stare grew harder, if such a thing were possible, but his grin was sloppy and he swayed slightly as he stood.

'Now you just wait a minute, girlie,' he said, with a sneering tone. 'Bernard ain't going nowhere, especially not till you tell us what's on your mind.'

I frowned a little. Looked him over. 'And how are you related to Bernard?' I asked politely.

'Well, it looks like I've just become his guardian,' replied Potato-Nose. 'Protecting him against a red-haired bint who seems to be getting a bit above herself, if you don't mind my saying so.'

There was a chortle from around the tavern.

'My name is Élise de la Serre of Versailles,' I smiled. 'To be honest, if you don't mind me saying, it's you who's getting above himself.'

He snorted. 'I doubt that to be the truth. Way I see it, it's soon coming to the end of the road for the likes of you and your kind.' He threw the last words over his shoulder, slurring them slightly.

'You would be surprised,' I said evenly. 'We red-haired bints have a habit of getting the job done. The job in this case being to speak to Bernard. I intend to get it done, so I suggest that you go back to your ale and leave me to my business.'

'And what business might that be? Far as I can see, the only business a lady has in a tavern is serving the ale, and I'm afraid that position is already taken.'

More titters, this time led by the barmaid.

‘Or perhaps you have come to entertain us. Is that right, Bernard, have you paid for a singer for the evening?’ Potato-Nose licked lips that were already wet. ‘Or perhaps another kind of entertainment?’

‘Look, you’re drunk, you’re forgetting your manners, so I’ll forget you said that on condition you stand aside.’

My voice was steely, and the men in the tavern noticed.

Not Potato-Nose, though, who was oblivious to the sudden shift in atmosphere and enjoying himself too much. ‘Perhaps you are here to entertain us with a dance,’ he said loudly. ‘What is it you’re hiding under there?’ And with that he reached forward to pluck at my robes.

He froze. My hand went to his. My eyes narrowed. Then Potato-Nose was pulling back and snatching a dagger from his belt.

‘Well, well,’ he continued, ‘it looks as though the red-haired bint is carrying a sword.’ He waved the knife. ‘Now what you be needing with a sword, mademoiselle?’

I sighed. ‘Oh, I don’t know. In case I need to cut some cheese? Why would it matter to you anyway?’

‘I’ll take it if you don’t mind,’ he said, ‘*then* you can be on your way.’

Behind, the other customers watched wide-eyed. Some of them began to edge away, sensing that their visitor was unlikely to give up her weapon willingly.

Instead, after a moment of seeming to consider, I reached a hand to my robes. Potato-Nose jabbed threateningly with the dagger but I held my palms out and moved slowly, drawing back the robes.

Below I wore a leather tunic. At my waist was the hilt of my sword. I reached for it, my eyes never leaving those of Potato-Nose.

‘Other hand,’ said Potato-Nose, grinning at his own cleverness, insisting with the knife.

I obliged. With finger and thumb I used my other hand to remove the sword gently by its handle. It slid slowly from the scabbard. All held their breath.

Then with a sudden movement of my wrist I flicked the sword up and out of the sheath so that one moment it was in my fingers, the next gone.

It happened in the blink of an eye. For a fraction of a second Potato-Nose gaped at the spot where the sword should have been, then his eyes jerked up in time to see it slice down towards his knife hand. Which he snatched out of the way, the sword thunking to the wood, where it stuck, vibrating slightly.

A smile of victory had already begun to gather at Potato-Nose’s mouth before he realized he had left himself exposed, his knife pointing in the wrong

direction, giving me enough room to step forward, twist and smash him across the nose with my forearm.

Blood fountained from his nose, and his eyes rolled upwards. His knees met the boards as he sank downwards, then seemed to wobble as I stepped forward, put my boot to his chest and was about to push him gently backwards when I thought better of it, took a step back and kicked him in the face instead.

He dropped face first and lay still, breathing but out for the count.

There was silence in the tavern as I beckoned Bernard then retrieved my sword. Bernard was already scrambling obediently over as I sheathed it.

'Don't worry,' I told him as he stood some feet away, Adam's apple bobbing, 'you're in no danger – unless you're planning on calling me a red-haired bint.' I looked at him. 'Are you planning on calling me a red-haired bint?'

Bernard, younger, taller and more spindly than Potato-Nose, shook his head vigorously.

'Good, then let's take this outside.'

I glanced around to check whether or not there were any more challengers – the customers, owner and barmaid all found something of interest to study at their feet – and satisfied, I ushered Bernard outside.

'Right,' I said, once there. 'I'm told you may know something about the whereabouts of a friend of mine – he goes by the name of Mowles.'

14 January 1789

i.

On a hillside overlooking a village outside Rouen, three landworkers wearing leather jerkins laughed and joked, and then, on the count of three, heaved a gallows on to a low wooden platform.

One of the men placed a three-legged stool beneath the gallows then bent to help his two companions as they went to work hammering in the struts that would keep the gallows in place, the rhythmic knock-knock carried on the wind to where I sat on my horse, a beautiful and calm gelding that I'd called Scratch, in honour of our beloved and long since departed wolfhound.

At the bottom of the hill was a village. It was tiny, more like a cluster of disconsolate shacks and a tavern that had been scattered along the perimeter of a brown and muddy square, but it was a village all the same.

A freezing rain had eased to a steady and just as freezing drizzle, and a fierce, bone-chilling wind had blown up. The villagers waiting in the square wrapped shawls tightly round themselves, clasping shirts at their necks as they awaited the day's entertainment – a hanging. What could be better? Nothing like a good hanging to raise the spirits when the frost had killed the crops and the local landowner was raising his rents and the king had new taxes he hoped to enforce.

From a building I guessed was the jailhouse there came a noise, and the frozen spectators turned to see a priest wearing a black hat and robes emerge, his voice rich with solemnity as he read from the bible. Behind him came a jailer, who held a length of rope, the other end of which tied the hands of a man who wore a hood over his head and staggered and slipped in the mud of the square, blindly shouting protestations in the direction of no one in particular.

'I think there's been some mistake,' he was shouting – except he shouted it in English, before remembering to do it in French. Villagers stood watching him as he was led towards the hill, some crossing themselves, some jeering. There was not a gendarme to be seen. No judge or officer of the law. This was what passed for justice out here in the country, it seemed. And they said Paris was uncivilized.

The man, of course, was Ruddock, and looking down the hill upon him, as he was pulled by rope so that he could swing at the end of another one, it was difficult to believe he had ever been an Assassin. No wonder the creed had washed their hands of him.

I pushed back the hood of my robes, shook my hair free, and looked down upon Bernard who stood gazing up at me with wide, adoring eyes.

'Here they come, mademoiselle,' he said, 'just as I promised they would.'

I dangled a purse into his palm then tweaked it away when he went to grasp it.

'And that's definitely him, is it?' I asked.

'That's him all right, mademoiselle. Man who goes by the name of Monsieur Gerald Mowles. They say he tried to swindle an elderly lady out of her money but was caught before he could leave.'

'And then sentenced to death.'

'That's right, mademoiselle; the villagers sentenced him to death.'

I gave a short laugh and looked back to where the grim procession had reached the foot of the hill and was climbing towards the gallows, shaking my head at how low Ruddock had sunk and wondering if it might be better to do the world a favour and let him swing. After all, this was a man who had tried to kill me and my mother.

Something Mr Weatherall had said to me before I left played over in my mind. 'If you find him, do me a favour and don't bring him here.'

I'd looked sharply at him. 'And why would that be, Mr Weatherall?'

'Well, two reasons. Firstly, because this is our hidey-hole and I don't want it compromised by some scumbag who sells his services to the highest bidder.'

'And the second reason?'

He shifted uncomfortably and reached to scratch at the stump of his leg, something he had a habit of doing. 'The other reason is that I've been doing a lot of thinking about our Mr Ruddock. Maybe too much thinking, you might say, than is healthy. And I suppose I blame him for this.' He indicated his leg. 'And also because, well, he tried to kill you and Julie, and I've never quite got over that.'

I cleared my throat. 'Was there ever anything between you and my mother, Mr Weatherall?'

He smiled and tapped the side of his nose. 'A gentleman never tells, young Élise, you should know that.'

But he was right. This man had attacked us. Of course I was going to save him from the gallows, but that was because there were things I wanted to know. But what about after that? Did I exact my revenge?

Scrambling towards the gallows was a group of women who formed a disorderly line, as Ruddock, still protesting his innocence, was dragged to where the gallows stood silhouetted against the winter-grey skyline.

'What are they doing?' I asked Bernard.

'They're barren women, mademoiselle. They hope that by touching the hand of the condemned man it will help them conceive.'

'You're a superstitious, man, Bernard.'

'It's not superstition if I know it to be true, mademoiselle.'

I looked at him, wondering what went on his head. How did Bernard and people like him get to be so medieval?

'Did you want to save Monsieur Mowles, mademoiselle?' he asked me.

'Indeed I do.'

'Well, you'd better hurry then, they've started.'

What? I swivelled in the saddle in time to see one of the leather jerkins haul the stool away and Ruddock's body fall and be snapped tight by the noose.

'*Mon dieu*,' I cursed and set off across the hillside, low in the saddle, hair out straight behind me.

Ruddock jerked and writhed on the rope.

'Gah!' I urged my horse – 'Come on, Scratch!' – and thundered towards the gallows as Ruddock's dangling legs pumped. I drew my sword.

I dropped the reins and sat upright in the saddle, a matter of yards from the gallows now. I tossed my sword from my right to my left hand, brought the weapon across my body, then flung out my right arm. I leaned to the right, dangerously low in the saddle.

His legs gave one last convulsion.

I swept the sword, sliced the rope and at the same time grabbed Ruddock's spasming body with my right arm, heaving it on to Scratch's neck and hoping to God he could bear the sudden extra weight and that with God's grace, and maybe just a little bit of luck, we'd somehow stay on all four legs.

Come on, Scratch.

But it was too much for Scratch, whose legs buckled, and we all came crashing to the ground.

In a trice I was on my feet, sword drawn. An enraged villager, deprived of his day's hanging, lumbered out of the small crowd towards me, but I stood, pivoted and kicked, choosing to stun rather than hurt him, and sent him reeling back into the knot of villagers. Collectively they thought twice about trying to stop me, deciding instead to stand and mutter darkly, the women pointing at me – 'Oi, you can't do this' – and prodding their men into doing something – and all of them looking pointedly at the priest, who merely looked worried.

Beside me, Scratch had scrambled to his feet. As had Ruddock, who'd immediately set off in a run. Still hooded, panicking, he dashed in the wrong direction, back towards the gallows, his hands tied, the severed noose dancing on his back.

'W*atch out*,' I tried to shout. But with a solid thump he ran into the platform, spinning off with a yell of pain then falling to the ground where he lay, coughing and obviously hurt.

I flipped back my robes and sheathed my sword, and turned to gather Scratch. Next I caught the eye of a young peasant at the front of the crowd.

'You,' I said. 'You look like a big strong lad. You can help me with a bit of lifting. *That* barely conscious man on *this* horse, please.'

'Oi, you can't –' began an older woman nearby, but in a second my sword was at her throat. She looked disdainfully down the blade at me. 'You lot think you can do what you want, don't you?' she sneered.

'Really? Then tell me on whose authority is this man condemned to death. You can all count yourselves lucky I don't report your actions to the gendarmes.'

They looked bashful; there was some clearing of throats and the woman at the end of my blade shifted her gaze.

'Now,' I said, 'I just want some help with some lifting.'

My helper did as he was told.

Next, making sure Ruddock was secure, I mounted Scratch, and as I pulled him round to leave I caught the eye of the lad who had helped me, gave him a wink – and then was off.

I rode for miles. There were plenty of people abroad, most hurrying home before darkness fell, but they paid me no mind. Perhaps they came to the conclusion that I was a long-suffering wife carrying her drunken husband home from the tavern. And if they did come to that conclusion, well, then I was certainly long-suffering where Ruddock was concerned.

From the draped body in front of me came the sound of a gurgle, so I dismounted, laid my prisoner on the ground, reached for a water bottle and squatted by his side. The stench of him assaulted my nostrils.

'Hello again,' I said when his eyes opened and he gazed glassily at me. 'It's Élise de la Serre.'

He groaned.

ii.

Ruddock tried to pull himself up on his elbows, but he was as weak as a kitten and from my squatting position I easily held him down with the fingertips of one

hand, placing the other to the hilt of my sword.

For a moment or so he writhed pathetically, more as though he was having a grown-up-baby tantrum than any concerted effort to escape.

Once he settled, he stared up at me balefully. ‘Look, what do you want?’ he said with a hurt tone. ‘I mean, you obviously don’t want to kill me, otherwise you would have done it by now …’

Something occurred to him. ‘Oh no. You haven’t been saving my life in order to have the pleasure of killing me yourself, have you? I mean, that would be cruel and unusual. You’re not doing that, are you?’

‘No,’ I said, ‘I’m not doing that. Not yet.’

‘So what is it you want?’

‘I want to know who hired you to kill me and my mother in Paris in ’75.’

He snorted disbelievingly. ‘And if I tell you, *then* you’ll kill me.’

‘Try this: if you don’t tell me, I’ll kill you.’

He turned his head to one side. ‘And what if I don’t know?’

‘Well, then I’ll torture you until you tell me.’

‘Well, then I’ll just say any name until you let me go.’

‘And then when I find out you lied I’ll come after you again, and I’ve found you twice, Monsieur Ruddock, I’ll find you again, and then again, if necessary, and then again. And you’ll never be rid of me, not until I have satisfaction.’

‘Oh for crying out loud,’ he said. ‘What have I done to deserve this?’

‘You tried to kill my mother and me.’

‘Well, yes,’ he admitted, ‘but I didn’t succeed, did I?’

‘Who hired you?’

‘I don’t know.’

I went up to one knee, drew my sword and held it to his face, the tip of it just under his eyeball.

‘Unless you were hired by a ghost, you know who hired you. Now who hired you?’

His eyeballs darted furiously as though trying to get a fix on the point of the blade. ‘I promise you,’ he wheedled, ‘I promise you I don’t know.’

I jogged the blade slightly.

‘A man!’ he squealed. ‘A man in a coffee house in Paris.’

‘Which coffee house?’

‘The Café Procope.’

‘And what was his name?’

‘He didn’t tell me.’

I flashed the blade across his right cheek, giving him a cut. He screamed and though inside I flinched I kept my face blank – cruel, even – the face of someone

determined to get what she wants, even though I was fighting a sinking feeling inside, a sense that I'd come to the end of a decade-long wild-goose chase.

'I promise. I promise. He was a stranger to me. He didn't tell me, I didn't ask. I took half the money then and was to return for it when the job was done. But, of course, I never went back.'

With a sinking heart I realized he was telling the truth: that fourteen years ago an anonymous man had hired another anonymous man to do a job. And there the story ended.

I had one last bluff up my sleeve, and I stood, keeping the blade where it was.

'Then all that remains is to exact revenge for what you did in '75.'

His eyes widened. 'Oh for God's sake, you *are* going to kill me.'

'Yes,' I said.

'I can find out,' he said quickly. 'I can find out who the man was. Let me find out for you.'

I regarded him carefully, as though mulling it over, even though the truth was I had no intention of killing him. Not like this. Not in cold blood.

At last I said, 'I'll spare your life so that you can do as you say. Know this, though, Ruddock, I want to hear from you within six months – *six months*. You can find me at the La Serre's Île Saint-Louis estate in Paris. Whether you have learnt anything or not, you come to find me or you can spend the rest of your days expecting me to appear from the shadows and slit your throat. Do I make myself clear?'

I sheathed my sword, mounted Scratch. 'There's a town two miles in that direction,' I said, pointing. 'See you in six months, Ruddock.'

I rode away. And I waited until I was out of sight of Ruddock to let my shoulders slump.

Wild-goose chase indeed. All I'd learnt was that there was nothing to learn.

Would I ever see Ruddock again? I doubted it. I wasn't sure if my promise to hunt him down was an empty threat or not, but I knew this: like much else in life it was a lot easier said than done.

4 May 1789

This morning I woke early, dressed and went to where my trunk was waiting for me by the front door of the lodge. I'd hoped to slip out quietly, but when I crept through to the entrance hall they were all were: Madame Levene and Jacques; Hélène and Mr Weatherall.

Mr Weatherall held out his hand. I looked at him.

'Your short sword,' he prompted. 'You can leave it here. I'll take good care of it.'

'But then I won't have a …'

He'd reached for another sword. He tucked his crutches into his armpits and held it out to me.

'A cutlass,' I said, turning it over in my hands.

'Indeed, it is,' said Mr Weatherall. 'Lovely fighting weapon. Light and easy to handle; great for close combat.'

'It's beautiful,' I said.

'Too blinkin' right it's beautiful. It'll stay beautiful if you take good care of it. And no naming it now, you hear?'

'I promise,' I said, and stood on tiptoes to kiss him. 'Thank you, Mr Weatherall.'

He blushed. 'You know, you're a grown woman now, Élise. A grown woman who's saved my life. You can stop calling me Mr Weatherall. You can call me Freddie.'

'You'll always be Mr Weatherall to me.'

'Oh, suit your bloody self,' he said, pretending to be exasperated, and used the opportunity to turn and wipe a tear from his eye.

I kissed Madame Levene and thanked her for everything. With gleaming eyes she held me at arm's length, as though wanting to study me. 'I asked you to come back from London a changed person, and you did me proud. You went an angry girl, and came back a young woman. You are a credit to the Maison Royale.'

I brushed aside the proffered hand of Jacques, and instead took him in a hug and gave him a kiss that made him blush. I cast a sideways glance at Hélène, and

in an instant I realized that they had formed a bond.

‘He’s a lovely lad,’ I whispered into her ear as I gave her a goodbye kiss, and I’ll eat my hat if they aren’t together by the time of my next visit.

Talking of which, I put on my hat and took hold of my trunk. Jacques bounded forward to take it from me but I stopped him. ‘That’s very kind of you, Jacques, but I wish to meet the carriage alone.’

And so I did. I took my trunk to the service highway close to the gates of the Maison Royale. The school building stood on the hillside watching me, and where once upon a time I would have seen malevolence in that stare, now I saw comfort and protection – which I was leaving behind.

It wasn’t far from the Maison Royale to home, of course. I’d barely settled by the time we came to the tree-bordered drive of our chateau, which ahead of me looked like a castle with its turrets and towers, presiding over the gardens that swept away in all directions.

There I was met by Olivier, and once inside greeted by staff, some of whom I knew well – Justine, the sight of her bringing the memories of Mother flooding back – some who were unfamiliar faces to me. When my trunk was installed in my room I took a tour of the house. I’d returned in the school holidays, of course. It wasn’t as if this was some great homecoming. But even so, it felt like one. And for the first time in years I climbed the stairs to Mother’s rooms and went to her bedchamber.

The fact that it was serviced but otherwise left as it had been created a strong, almost overwhelming sense of her presence, as though she might walk in at any moment, find me sitting on the end of her bed and sit down next to me, putting an arm round my shoulders. ‘I’m very proud of you, Élise. We both are.’

I stayed like that for a while, with her phantom arm round my shoulder. It wasn’t until I felt the tickle of tears on my cheeks that I realized I was crying.

5 May 1789

i.

In a courtyard of the Hôtel des Menus-Plaisirs in Versailles, the king addressed the 1,614-strong meeting of the Estates General. It was the first time that the representatives of the three estates – the clergy, the nobility and the common man – had officially met since 1614, and the huge vaulted chamber was full, with row upon row of expectant Frenchmen hoping that the king would say something – anything – that would help pull his country from the swamp in which it was apparently mired. Something to point the way forward.

I sat beside my father during the speech and the two of us were positively vibrating with hope before it began, a feeling which soon dissipated as our beloved leader began to drone on – and on, and on – saying nothing of any significance, offering no comfort to the downtrodden Third Estate, the common man.

Across the way, seated together, were the Crows. Messieurs Lafrenière, Le Peletier and Sivert, and Madame Levesque, wearing scowls that went with the black of their clothes. As I took my seat I caught their eye and gave a short deferential bow, hiding my true feelings behind a false smile. In return they nodded back with false smiles of their own and I felt their eyes on me, assessing me as I took my seat.

When I pretended to inspect something at my feet I looked at them surreptitiously from beneath my curls. Madame Levesque was whispering something to Sivert. Receiving a nod in return.

When the boring speech was over the estates began shouting at one another. Father and I took our leave of the Hôtel des Menus-Plaisirs, dismissed our carriage and walked along the avenue de Paris before taking a footpath that led across to the rear lawns of our chateau.

We chatted idly as we walked. He asked me about my final year at the Maison Royale but I steered the conversation to less dangerous and lie-filled waters, and so for a while we reminisced about when Mother was alive, and when Arno had joined the household. And then, when we had left the crowds behind and had

open fields to one side, the palace watching over us on the other, he broached the subject – the subject being my failure to bring Arno into the fold.

‘Indoctrinate him, you mean,’ I said at the mention of the idea.

Father sighed. He was wearing his favourite hat, a black beaver which he now removed, first scratching at the wig below, which irritated him, and then passing a hand across his forehead and regarding his palm as though expecting to find it slicked with sweat.

‘Do I need to remind you, Élise, that there is a very real possibility that the Assassins might reach Arno first? You forget I have spent a great deal of time with him. I am aware of his abilities. He is … gifted. It can only be a matter of time before the Assassins sniff that out, too.’

‘Father, what if I were to bring Arno over to the Order …’

He gave a short, mirthless laugh. ‘Well, then it would be about time.’

I ploughed on. ‘You say he’s gifted. What if Arno could somehow combine the two creeds? What if he is the one capable of doing that?’

‘Your letters,’ said Father, nodding thoughtfully. ‘You spoke about this in your letters.’

‘I’ve given the matter much thought.’

‘I can tell. Your ideas, they had a certain youthful idealism, but they also showed a certain … maturity.’

For that I offered a silent thanks (not to mention an apology) to Haytham Kenway.

‘Perhaps it may interest you to know that I have arranged to meet the Assassin Grand Master, Count Mirabeau,’ continued Father.

‘Really?’

He held a finger to his lips. ‘Yes, really.’

‘Because you want our two orders to begin talks?’ I asked, whispering now.

‘Because I think we may have some common ground on the issue of our country’s future.’

Perhaps, dear journal, you’re wondering if my conversion to the idea of Assassin–Templar unity had anything to do with the fact that I was a Templar and Arno an Assassin?

No, is the answer. Any vision I had for the future was for the good of us all. But if that meant that Arno and I could be together, with no pretence or lies between us, then of course I embraced that, too, but as a pleasant side effect only. Promise.

ii.

Later, in the palace, a ceremony took place – my induction to the Order. My father wore the ceremonial robes of the Grand Master: a long, flowing ermine-lined cloak and a silk stole draped round his neck, his waistcoat buttoned and the buckles of his shoes polished to a shine.

As he gave me the Templar pin of initiation I gazed into his smiling eyes, and he looked so handsome, so proud.

I had no idea it would be the last time I saw him alive.

But during the initiation there was no sign of the fact that we had disagreed. Instead of fatigue there was pride in his eyes. There were others there too, of course. The dreaded Crows as well as other knights of the Order, and they smiled weakly and offered insincere congratulations, but the ceremony belonged to the de la Serre family. I felt the spirit of my mother watching over me as they made me a Templar knight at last, and I vowed to uphold the name of the de la Serres.

iii.

And later, at the 'private soirée' held to honour my induction, I walked through the party and felt like a changed woman. Yes, perhaps they thought I couldn't hear them gossiping behind their fans, telling each other how I spent my days drinking and gambling. They whisper how they pity my father. They make disparaging comments about my clothes.

But their words were water off a duck's back. My mother hated these courtly women and raised me to put no store by what they said. Her lessons serve me well. These women couldn't hurt me now.

And then I saw him. I saw Arno.

iv.

I led him a merry dance, of course, partly for old times' sake and partly so that I could compose myself ahead of meeting him again.

Aha. It seemed that Arno's presence at the party was not officially ratified. Either that or, true to form, he had made an enemy. Knowing him, probably a bit of both. In fact, as I made my way quickly along the corridors, picking up my skirts and weaving between party-goers, keeping him just on my tail, it appears that we formed something of a procession.

Of course, it would not do for the newly initiated daughter of the Grand Master to be seen to be participating in, even encouraging such behaviour. (See, Mr Weatherall? See, Father? I was maturing. I was growing up.) And so I

decided to end the chase, ducked into a side room, waited for Arno to appear, dragged him inside and stood facing him at last.

‘You seem to have caused quite a commotion,’ I told him, drinking him in.

‘What can I say?’ he said, ‘You were always a bad influence …’

‘You were a worse one,’ I told him.

And then we kissed. How it happened I couldn’t for certain say. One moment we were reunited friends, the next we were reunited lovers.

Our kiss was long, and passionate, and when we eventually broke apart we stared at each other for some moments.

‘Are you wearing one of my father’s suits?’ I teased him.

‘Are you wearing a dress?’ he retorted. For which he earned a playful smack.

‘Don’t even start. I feel like a mummy wrapped up in this thing.’

‘Must be quite an occasion to get you so fancy,’ he said, smiling.

‘It’s not like that. Truth be told it’s a lot of ceremony and pontification. Dull as dirt.’

Arno grinned. Oh, the old Arno. The old fun come back into my life. It was as though it had been raining and on seeing him the sun had come out – like returning home from faraway and at last seeing your front door in the distance. We kissed again and held each other close.

‘Well, when you don’t invite me to your parties, everyone suffers,’ he joked.

‘I did try, but father was adamant.’

‘Your father?’

From the other side of the door came the muted sound of the band, the laughter of party-goers making their way back and forth in the corridor outside, and heavy footfalls, running feet – the guards still in search of Arno. Then suddenly the door shook, thumped from the other side, and a gruff voice called, ‘Who’s in there?’

Arno and I looked at one another, kids again – kids caught stealing apples or taking pies from the kitchen. If I could bottle that moment I would.

Something tells me I’m never going to feel happiness like that again.

v.

I bundled Arno out of the window, snatched up a goblet then burst out of the door, affecting an unsteady look. ‘Oh my. That wasn’t the billiard room at all, was it?’ I said gaily.

The soldiers shifted uncomfortably on seeing me. And so they should. After all, this ‘private soirée’ was being held in my honour …

‘We are pursuing an interloper, Mademoiselle de la Serre. Have you seen him?’

I gave the man a deliberately fuzzy look. ‘Antelope? No, I shouldn’t think they can climb stairs, not with those little hooves, and how did they get out of the Royal Menagerie?’

The men shared an uncertain look. ‘Not an antelope, an interloper. A suspicious person. Have you seen anyone like that?’

By now the guards were anxious and on edge. Sensing their quarry was near, they were irritated by my stalling.

‘Oh, there was Madame de Polignac.’ I dropped my voice to a whisper. ‘Her hair has a bird in it. I think she stole it from the Royal Menagerie.’

Able to control his irritation no longer, another of the guards strode forward. ‘Please move aside so we may check this room, mademoiselle.’

I swayed drunkenly, and perhaps, I hoped, a little provocatively. ‘You’ll only find me, I’m afraid.’ I beamed at him, giving him the full benefit of my smile, not to mention my décolletage. ‘I’ve been searching for the billiard room for almost an hour.’

The guard’s eye wandered. ‘We can show you there, mademoiselle,’ he said with a short bow, ‘and we’ll lock the door to prevent any further misunderstandings.’

As the guards accompanied me away, I hoped, firstly, that Arno would be able to jump down to the courtyard, and, secondly, that something might happen to distract the guards from actually taking me all the way down to the billiards room.

There is a saying: be careful what you wish for, for you might just get it.

I got the distraction I wanted when I heard a shout: ‘My God, he’s killed Lord de la Serre.’

And my whole world changed.

1 July 1789

It feels as though France is falling down around my ears. The much-vaunted assembly of Estates General had been given a terrible birth by the king's cure for insomnia masquerading as a speech, and sure enough the whole charade swiftly descended into a parade of bickering and in-fighting, and nothing was achieved.

How? Because prior to the meeting the Third Estate was angry. It was angry at being the poorest and being charged the most taxes, and its members were angry that despite making up the majority of the Estates General they had fewer votes than the nobility and the clergy.

After the meeting they were even more angry. They were angry that the king hadn't addressed any of their concerns. They were going to do something. The whole country – unless they were stupid or being wilfully thick and stubborn – knew that *something* was going to happen.

But I didn't care.

On 17 June the Third Estate voted to call itself the National Assembly, an assembly of 'the people'. There was some support from the other estates but really this was the common man finding his voice.

But I didn't care.

The king tried to stop them by closing the Salle des États, but that was like trying to shut the stable door after the horse had bolted. Not to be deterred they took their meeting to an indoor tennis court instead, and on 20 June the National Assembly swore an oath. The Tennis Court Oath they called it, which sounds comical, but it wasn't really.

Not when you considered that they were planning to build a new constitution for France.

Not when you considered it spelled the end of the monarchy.

But I didn't care.

By 27 June the king's nerves were more apparent than ever. As messages of support for the Assembly poured in from Paris and other French cities, the military began to arrive in Paris and Versailles. There was a palpable tension in the air.

And I didn't care about that either.

I should have done, of course. I should have had the strength of character to put my personal troubles behind me. But the fact was, I couldn't.

I couldn't because my father is dead, and grief has returned to my life like a dark mass living inside me, which awakes with me in the morning, accompanies me through the day and then is restless at night, keeping me from sleep, feeding on my remorse and my regrets.

I had spent so many years being a disappointment to him. The chance to be the daughter he deserved has been snatched away from me.

And yes, I'm aware that our homes in Versailles and Paris slip into neglect, their condition mirroring my own state of mind. I'm staying in Paris but letters from Olivier, our head butler in Versailles arrive twice weekly, increasingly concerned and shrill as he relates details of maids and valets who leave and aren't replaced. But I don't care.

Here on the Paris estate I've banished staff from my rooms and skulk the lower floors at night, not wanting to see another soul. Trays bearing food and correspondence are left outside my door and sometimes I can hear the housemaid whispering with the lady's maid, and I can imagine the kind of things they're saying about me. But I don't care.

I've had letters from Mr Weatherall. Among other things he wants to know if I've been to see Arno in the Bastille, where he is being held on suspicion of murdering my father, or even if I'm taking steps to protest his innocence.

I should write and tell Mr Weatherall that the answer is no, because shortly after Father's murder I returned to the Versailles estate, went to his office, and found a letter that had been pushed beneath the door. A letter addressed to Father that read:

> *Grand Master de la Serre,*
>
> *I have learnt through my agents that an individual within our Order plots against you. I beg you be on your guard at the initiation tonight. Trust no one. Not even those you call friends.*
>
> *May the father of understanding guide you,*
> *L*

I wrote to Arno. A letter in which I accused him of being responsible for my father's death. A letter in which I told him I never wanted to see him again. But I didn't send it.

Instead my feelings for him festered. In the place of a childhood friend and latter-day lover came an interloper, a pathetic orphan who had arrived and stolen my father's love, then helped to kill him.

Arno is in the Bastille. Good. I hope he rots in there.

4 July 1789

It hurt Mr Weatherall to walk too far. Not only that, but the area of the Maison Royale where they lived, far beyond the school and out of bounds to the pupils, was not exactly the best-kept area; negotiating it with crutches was difficult.

Nevertheless, he loved to walk when we visited. Just me and him. And I wondered if it was because we'd see the odd deer together, watching us from in the trees, or maybe because we would reach a sun-dappled clearing with a tree trunk on which to sit, and it would remind us of the years we had spent training.

We found our way there this morning, and Mr Weatherall sat with a grateful sigh as he took the weight off his good foot, and sure enough I felt a huge pang of nostalgia for my old life, when my days had been full of swordsmanship with him and play with Arno. When Mother had been alive.

I missed them. I missed them both so much.

'Arno should have delivered it, the letter?' he asked after a while.

'No. He should have *given* it to Father. Olivier saw him with a letter.'

'So he should and he didn't. And how do you feel about that?'

My voice was quiet. 'Betrayed.'

'Do you think the letter might have saved your father?'

'I think it might have.'

'And is that why you've been so quiet on the small matter of your boyfriend currently residing in the Bastille?'

I said nothing. Not that there was anything to say. Mr Weatherall spent a moment with his face upturned to a beam of sunlight that broke the canopy of the trees, the light dancing over his whiskers and the folds of flesh on his closed eyes, drinking in the day with an almost beatific smile. And then, with a short nod to thank me for indulging him in silence, he held out a hand. 'Let me see that letter again.'

I dug into my tunic and passed it to him. 'Who is "L", do you think?

Mr Weatherall cocked an eyebrow at me as he handed back the letter. 'Who do you think "L" is?'

'The only "L" I can think of is our friend, Monsieur Chretien Lafrenière.'

'But he's a Crow.'

‘Would that put paid to the theory that the Crows were conspiring against your mother and father?’

I followed his line of reasoning. ‘No, it could just mean that some of them were conspiring against my mother and father.’

He chuckled and scratched his beard. ‘That’s right. “An individual”, according to the letter. Only, as far as we know, none has yet made a bid for Grand Master.’

‘No,’ I said quietly.

‘Well, here’s the thing – you’re the Grand Master now, Élise.’

‘They know that.’

‘Do they? You could have fooled me. Tell me, how many meetings have you had with your advisors?’

I gave him a narrow-eyed look. ‘I must be allowed to grieve.’

‘Nobody says different. Just that it’s been two months now, Élise. Two months and you’ve not conducted one bit of Templar business. Not one bit. The Order knows that you’re Grand Master in name but you’ve done nothing to reassure them that the stewardship is in safe hands. If there was a coup – if another knight were to step forward and declare him or herself Grand Master, well, he or she wouldn’t have much of a challenge on their hands, now, would they?

‘Grieving for your father is one thing, but you need to honour him. You’re the latest in a line of La Serres. The first female Grand Master of France. You need to get out there and prove you’re worthy of them, not be hanging around your estate moping.’

‘But my father was murdered. What example would I set if I were to let his murder go unavenged?’

He gave a short laugh. ‘Well, correct me if I’m wrong but you ain’t exactly doing one thing or another at the moment, are you? Best course of action: you take control of the Order and help steer it through the hard times ahead. Second-best course of action, you show a bit of La Serre spirit and let it be known that you’re hunting your father’s killer – and maybe help flush out this “individual”. Worst course of action: you sit on your arse moping about your dead mum and dad.’

I nodded. ‘So what do I do?’

‘Fist thing is to contact Lafrenière. Don’t mention the letter but do tell him you’re keen to take command of the Order. If he is loyal to the family then he’ll hopefully show his hand. Second thing is, I’m going to find you a lieutenant. Someone I know we can trust. Third thing, you should think about going to see Arno as well. You should remember that it wasn’t Arno who killed your father. The person who killed your father was the person who killed your father.’

8 July 1789

A letter has arrived:

My dearest Élise,

Firstly, I must apologize for not having replied to your letters before now. I confess my failure to give you the courtesy of a reply has been mainly out of anger that you deceived your way into my confidences, but on reflection there is much we have in common and, in fact, I am grateful that you chose to confide in me, and would like to assure you that your apologies are accepted.

I am most gratified that you have taken my brother's writings to heart. Not solely because it justifies my decision to give them to you, but because I believe that had he lived my brother might have gone on to achieve some of his aims, and I hope that you might do so in his stead.

I note that your intended, Arno, boasts an Assassin heritage and the fact that you are in love with him bodes well for a future accord. I do believe you are right in having misgivings over your father's plans to convert him, and while I also agree that your misgivings may have their roots in rather more selfish motives, that doesn't necessarily make them the wrong course of action. Equally, if Arno were to be discovered by the Assassins, the creed might be persuasive enough to turn him. Your beloved might easily become your enemy.

On this note, I have information that may be of use to you. Something that has appeared in what I can only describe as Assassin communiqués. As you can imagine I would not normally involve myself in such matters; what information on the Creed's activities I receive in passing tends to go no further, as much a function of my own disinterest as any particular discretion. But this titbit may be of importance to you. It involves a high-ranking Assassin named Pierre Bellec, who is currently imprisoned in the Bastille. Bellec has written to say that he has discovered a young man possessing enormous Assassin gifts. The communiqué names this young prisoner as 'Arnaud'. However, as I'm sure you can imagine, the similarities in the name struck me as more than coincidental. If nothing else it may be something worth you looking into.

I remain, yours truly,
Jennifer Scott

14 July 1789

i.

Paris was in a state of uproar as I made my way through the streets. It had been this way for over two weeks now, ever since twenty thousand of the king's men had arrived to put down disturbances, as well as threatening Count Mirabeau and his Third Estate deputies. Then, when the king dismissed his finance minister, Jacques Necker, a man who many believed was the saviour of the French people, there were more uprisings.

Days ago, the Abbaye prison was stormed to free the guardsmen imprisoned for refusing to fire on protestors. These days it was said that the common soldier was giving his loyalties to the people, not the king. Already it felt as though the National Assembly – now called the Constituent Assembly – was in charge. They had created their own flag: a *tricolore*, which was everywhere. And if ever there was a symbol of the Assembly's fast-growing dominance, that was it.

Since the Abbaye prison revolt the streets in Paris had been thronged with armed men. Thirteen thousand of them had joined a people's militia and they roamed the districts looking for weapons, the call to find arms becoming louder and louder and more intense. This morning, it had reached a crescendo.

In the early hours the militia had stormed the Hôtel des Invalides and got their hands on muskets – tens of thousands of muskets, by all accounts. But they had no gunpowder, so now they needed gunpowder. Where was there gunpowder?

The Bastille. That's where I was heading. Early morning in a Paris boiling over with repressed fury and vengeance. Not a good place to be.

ii.

Looking around as I hurried through the streets, it didn't strike me at first, but then I saw that the crowds, though a mingled-together rushing, pushing pell-mell of bodies, actually fell into two distinct groups: those intent on preparing for the oncoming trouble, protecting themselves, their families and their possessions,

fleeing the trouble because they wished to avoid the conflict or, like me, because they were concerned they might well be the target of the trouble.

And those intent on starting the trouble.

And what distinguished the two groups? Weapons. The carrying of weapons – I saw pitchforks, axes and staffs brandished and held aloft – and the locating of weapons. A whisper became a shout, became a clamour. Where are the muskets? Where are the pistols? Where is the gunpowder? Paris was a powder keg.

Could all of this have been avoided? I wondered. Could we, the Templars, have prevented our beloved country reaching this dreadful impasse, teetering above a precipice of previously unimagined change?

There were shouts – shouts for 'Freedom!' mingled with the whinnies and brays of scattering, flustered animals.

Horses snorted as they were driven at dangerous speeds through crowded streets by panicked drivers. Herders tried to take wide-eyed, frightened livestock to safety. The stink of fresh dung was heavy in the air, but more than that there was another scent in Paris today. The smell of rebellion. No, not of rebellion, of revolution.

And why was I on the streets, and not helping the staff to board up the windows of the La Serre estate?

Because of Arno. Because even though I hated Arno I couldn't stand by – not while he was in danger. The truth was I'd done nothing about the letter from Jennifer Scott. What would Mr Weatherall, Mother and Father have thought about that? Me, a Templar – no, a Templar Grand Master, no less – knowing full well that one of our own was close to being discovered by the Assassins and doing nothing – not a thing – about it? Skulking around the unpopulated floors of her Paris estate like a lonely old eccentric widow?

I'll say this for rebellion, there's nothing like it to spur a girl into action, and even though my feelings for Arno hadn't changed – it wasn't as though I'd suddenly stopped hating him for his failure to deliver the letter – I still wanted to get to him before the mob.

I'd hoped that I might arrive before them, but even as I rushed towards Saint-Antoine it became apparent that I was not ahead of a tide of people going in the same direction; rather I was part of it, joining a throng of partisans, militia and tradesman of all stripes, who brandished weapons and flags as they moved towards that great symbol of the king's tyranny, the Bastille.

I cursed, knowing I was too late, but staying with the crowd, darting between knots of people as I tried, somehow, to get ahead of the pack. With the towers and ramparts of the Bastille visible in the distance, the crowd seemed to slow down all of a sudden and a cry went up. In the street was a cart bristling with

muskets, probably liberated from the armoury, and there were men and women handing them out to a sea of waving, upstretched hands. The mood was jovial, celebratory, even. There was a sense that this was easy.

I pushed past, through rows of tightly packed bodies, ignoring the curses that came my way. The crowds were less dense on the other side but now I saw a cannon being wheeled along the highway. It was manoeuvred by men on foot, some in uniform, some in the garb of the partisan, and for a moment I wondered what was happening until the cry went up: 'The Gardes Françaises have come over!' Sure enough I heard tales of soldiers turning on their commanders; there was talk that men's heads had been mounted on pikes.

Not far away I saw a well-dressed gentleman who had overheard too. He and I shared a quick look and I could see the fear in his eyes. He was thinking the same as me: was he safe? How far would these revolutionaries go? After all, their cause had been supported by many nobles and members of the other estates, and Mirabeau himself was an aristocrat. But would that mean anything in the upheaval? When it came to revenge, would they discriminate?

The battle at the Bastille began as I came to it. On the approach to the prison I'd heard that a delegation of the Assembly had been invited inside to discuss terms with the governor, De Launay. However, the delegation had been inside for three hours now, eating breakfast, and the crowd outside had become more and more restless. Meanwhile, one of the protestors had climbed from the roof of a perfume shop on to the chains that held the raised drawbridge and had been cutting the chains, and as I rounded the corner and brought the Bastille into view he finished the job and the drawbridge fell with a great wallop that seemed to reverberate around the entire area.

We all saw it fall on to a man standing below. A man unlucky enough to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, who one moment was standing on the bank of the moat, brandishing a musket and egging on those who were trying to free the drawbridge, and the next moment had disappeared in a mist of blood and tangle of limbs protruding at horrible angles from beneath the drawbridge.

A great cheer went up. This one unfortunate life lost was nothing compared to the victory of opening the drawbridge. In the next instant the crowds began to flood across the open bridge and into the outside courtyard of the Bastille.

iii.

The reply came. I heard a shout from the battlements and a thunderclap of musket fire, which was followed by a smoke cloud that rose like a puff of powder from the ramparts.

Below, we dived for cover as musket balls zinged into the stone and cobbles around us, and there were screams. It wasn't enough to disperse the crowds, though. Like poking a wasps' nest with a stick, the gunfire, far from deterring the protestors, had only made them more angry. More determined.

Plus, of course, they had cannons.

'Fire!' came a shout from not far away, and I saw the cannons buck into huge billows of smoke before the balls tore chunks out of the Bastille. Moving forward were more armed men. Muskets held by the attackers bristled above their heads like the spines of a hedgehog.

Militia had taken control of buildings around us, and smoke was pouring from the windows. The governor's house was ablaze, I was told. The smell of gunpowder mingled with the stench of smoke. From the Bastille came another shout and there was a second volley of gunfire and I ducked down behind a low stone wall. Around me were more screams.

Meanwhile, the crowd had made their way across a second drawbridge and were trying to negotiate a moat. From behind me planks were produced and used to form a bridge into the inner sanctum of the prison. Soon they would be through.

More shots were fired. The protestors' cannons replied. Stone fell around us.

In there somewhere was Arno. With my sword drawn I joined the protestors flooding through into the inner sanctum.

From above us, the musket fire stopped, the battle won now. I caught a glimpse of the governor, De Launay. He had been arrested and there was talk of taking him to the Hôtel de Ville, the Paris city hall.

For a moment I allowed myself a moment of relief. The revolution had maintained its head; there was to be no bloodlust.

But I was wrong. A cry went up. Idiotically, De Launay had aimed a kick at a man in the crowd and, incensed, the man had leapt forward and plunged a knife into him. Soldiers attempting to protect De Launay were pushed back by the crowd and he disappeared beneath a seething mass of bodies. I saw blades arcing up and down, plumes of blood making rainbows, and heard one long, piercing scream like that of a wounded animal.

Suddenly there was a cheer and a pike rose above the crowd. On it was the head of De Launay, the flesh at his torn neck ragged and bloody, his eyeballs rolled up in their sockets.

The crowd whooped and hollered and looked upon their prize with happy, blood-spattered faces as it bobbed up and down on the pike, paraded back along the planks and drawbridges, over the mangled, forgotten body of the protestor

crushed by the drawbridge and out on to the streets of Paris, where the sight of it would inspire further acts of bloodlust and barbarism.

There and then I knew it was the end for us all. For every noble man and woman in France it was the end. Whatever our sympathies: even if we'd talked of the need for change; even if we'd agreed that Marie Antoinette's excesses were disgusting and the king both greedy and inadequate, and even if we'd supported the Third Estate and backed the Assembly, it didn't matter, because from this moment on none of us was safe; we were all collaborators or oppressors in the eyes of the mob and they were in charge now.

I heard screams as more of the Bastille guards were lynched. Next I caught sight of a prisoner, a frail old man who was being lifted down a set of steps leading from a prison door. And then, with a rush of mixed emotions – gratitude, love and hate among them – I saw Arno high up on the ramparts. He was with another old man, the pair of them running towards the other side of the fortress.

'Arno,' I called to him, but he didn't hear. There was too much noise and he was too far away.

I screamed again, '*Arno*,' and those nearby turned to look my way, made suspicious by my cultured tones.

Unable to do anything, I watched as the first man came to the edge of the ramparts and jumped.

The jump was a leap of faith. An Assassin leap of faith. So that was Pierre Bellec. Sure enough, Arno hesitated then did the same. Another Assassin leap of faith.

He was one of them now.

iv.

I turned and ran. I needed to get home now and send the staff away. Let them get clear before they were caught up in the trouble.

Crowds were moving away from the Bastille and to the city hall. Already I was hearing that the provost of the merchants of Paris, Jacques de Flesselles, had been slaughtered on the steps of the Hôtel de Ville, his head hacked off and was being paraded through the streets.

My stomach churned. Shops and buildings were burning. I heard the sound of smashing glass, saw people running, laden down with stolen goods. For weeks Paris had been hungry. We had in our estates and chateaus eaten well, of course, but the common man had been driven almost to the brink of starvation, and though the militia on the streets had prevented any full-scale looting they were powerless to do so now.

Away from Saint-Antoine the crowds had thinned and there were carriages and carts in the road, mostly driven by city folk wanting to escape the trouble. They'd hastily shoved their belongings into whatever mode of transport they could find and were desperately trying to escape. Most were simply ignored by the crowds, but I caught my breath to see a huge two-horse-drawn carriage, complete with liveried groom at the front, slowly trying to make its way through the streets, knowing straight away that whoever it was inside was asking for trouble.

This one wasn't inconspicuous. As if the simple sight of this sumptuous carriage weren't enough to incense the mob, the groom was shouting at bystanders to clear the road, waving at them with his crop as though trying to clear a cloud of insects, all the while being goaded by his red-faced mistress who peered from the window of the carriage, wafting a lace handkerchief.

The arrogance and stupidity of them was breathtaking, and even I, whose veins ran with aristocratic blood, took a measure of satisfaction when the crowd paid them no mind at all.

Next, though, the mob turned on them. The situation had been inflamed enough and they began to rock the carriage on its springs.

I considered moving forward to help but knew that to do so would be to sign my own death warrant. Instead I could only watch as the groom was pulled from his imperious perch and the beating began.

He didn't deserve it. Nobody deserved a beating at the hands of a mob, because it was indiscriminate and vicious and driven by a collective desire for blood. Even so, he had done nothing to guard against his fate. The whole of Paris knew that the Bastille had fallen. The Ancien Régime had been crumbling but in one morning it had fallen completely. To pretend otherwise was madness. Or, in in his case, suicide.

The coachman had run. Meanwhile, members of the crowd had clambered on top of the carriage, ripped open trunks and were tossing clothes from the roof as they delved for valuables. The doors were torn open and a protesting woman dragged from the door. The crowd laughed as one of the protestors planted a foot on her behind and sent her sprawling to the ground.

From the carriage came a shout of protest. 'What is the meaning of this?' and my heart sank a little further to hear the usual tone of aristocratic indignation in his voice. Was he that stupid? Was he too stupid to realize that he and his kind no longer had the right to such a tone of voice? He and his kind were no longer in charge.

I heard his clothes rip as they tore him from the carriage. His wife was sent on her way screaming down the street, driven by a series of kicks up the backside,

and I wondered how she would fare on her own, in a Paris that was topsy-turvy to the one she had known all her life. I doubted she'd last the day.

Carrying on my way my hopes began to sink. It seemed that looters were pouring out of the houses on either sides of the thoroughfare. In the air was the crackle of musket fire and the sound of breaking glass, triumphant cries from those able to get their way, dismayed screams from the unlucky ones.

I was running by now, sword still drawn and ready to face anyone who stood between me and my chateau. My heart hammered in my ears. I prayed that the staff had got clear, that the mob had not yet reached our estate. All I could think of was my trunk. Among other things, it contained Haytham Kenway's letters and the necklace given to me by Jennifer Scott. And little trinkets I had collected over the years, things that meant something to me.

Arriving at the gates I saw the butler, Pierre, standing with a case of his own hugged to his chest, his eyes darting to and fro.

'Thank God, mademoiselle,' he said, catching sight of me, and I looked past him, my gaze travelling along the courtyard and up the steps to the front door.

What I saw was a courtyard strewn with my belongings. The door of the chateau stood open and I could see devastation within. My house had been ransacked.

'The mob were in and out within minutes,' said Pierre breathlessly. 'The boards were up and the locks were thrown, but they captured hold of the gardener Henri and threatened to kill him unless we opened the doors. We had no choice, mademoiselle.'

I nodded, thinking only of my trunk in my bedchamber, part of me wanting to dash there straight away, another part of me needing to put this right.

'You absolutely did the right thing,' I assured him. 'What about your personal effects?'

He hefted the case he held. 'All in here.'

'Even so, it must have been a frightening experience. You should go. Right now is not a good time to be associated with nobility. Make your way to Versailles and we shall see to it that you receive recompense.'

'And what about you, mademoiselle? Won't you come?'

I glanced towards the villa, feeling steely-hearted to see my family's belongings discarded like rubbish. I recognized a dress that had belonged to my mother. So they had been to the upper floors and had rampaged through the bedchambers.

I pointed with my sword. 'I'm going in there,' I said.

'No, mademoiselle, I can't allow that,' said Pierre. 'There are still some of the bandits inside, drunk as lords, sifting through the room for more things to steal.'

‘That’s why I’m going in there. To stop them doing that.’
‘But they’re armed, mademoiselle.’
‘So am I.’
‘They’re drunk and vicious.’
‘Well, I’m angry and vicious. And that’s better.’ I looked at him. ‘Now go.’

v.

He was never really serious about staying. Pierre was a good man, but his loyalty only went so far. He would have resisted the looters – but not *that* much. Perhaps it had been better that I wasn’t home when the raiders arrived. There would have been bloodshed. Maybe the wrong people would have lost their lives.

At the front door I drew my pistol. With my elbow I shoved the door wider and crept into the entrance hall.

It was a mess. Overturned tables. Smashed vases. Unwanted booty everywhere. Lying on his front close by was a man snoring in a drunken slumber. Slumped in an opposite corner was another one, this one with his chin resting on his chest, an empty bottle of wine in his hand. The door to the wine cellar was open and I approached it carefully, my pistols raised. I listened but heard nothing, prodded the nearby drunk with my toe and got a loud snore for my troubles. Drunk, yes. Vicious, no. Same for his friend by the door.

Snoring apart, the ground floor was silent. I walked to a stairway that led below-stairs and again I listened, hearing nothing.

Pierre was right; they must have been in and out within moments, looting the wine cellar and the pantry and no doubt the silverware from the plate room. My home just another step along the way.

Now for upstairs. I returned to the entrance hall then took the stairs, heading straight for my bedchamber and finding it in a similar ransacked state to the rest of the house. They’d found the trunk but evidently decided that whatever was inside was worthless, so had settled merely for spreading the contents around the floor. I sheathed my cutlass, holstered my pistol and dropped to my knees, gathering the papers to me, sorting them and replacing them in the trunk. Thank God the necklace had been in the bottom of the trunk; they’d missed it altogether. Carefully I laid the correspondence on top of the trinkets, smoothing out any creased pages, keeping the letters together. When I’d finished I locked the trunk. It would need to go to the Maison Royale for safekeeping, just as soon as I’d cleared and secured my home.

I was numb, I realized, as I pulled myself to my feet and sat on the end of the bed to gather my thoughts. All I could think of was closing the doors, crawling

into a corner somewhere and avoiding all human contact. Perhaps that was the real reason I'd sent Pierre away. Because the pillaging of my home gave me another reason to mourn, and I wanted to mourn alone.

I stood and went to the landing, peering over the balcony to the entrance hall below. The only noise was the distant sounds of unrest from the street outside, but the light was dimming now; it had begun to get dark outside and I'd need to light some candles. First, though, to rid myself of my unwanted guests.

The one sleeping by the door seemed to rouse a little as I approached the foot of the stairs.

'If you're awake then I suggest you leave now,' I said, and my voice sounded loud in the entrance hall. 'And if you're not awake then I'm going to kick you in the balls until you are.'

He tried to lift his head, blinking as though regaining consciousness and trying to remember where he was and how he'd got here. He had one arm trapped beneath himself and he groaned as he rolled to free it.

And then he got up and closed the door.

Just like that. He got up and closed the door.

vi.

It took me a second or so to work out the question. The question being: how did a man who had been lying drunk on my entrance-hall floor stand up, with not a trace of a sway or swagger, and close the door without so much as a fumble or swipe? How did he do that?

The answer being that he wasn't drunk. He never had been. And what he had beneath himself was a pistol that he raised, with an almost casual air, and pointed at me.

Shit.

I swung round in time to see that the second drunk guy had also miraculously sobered up and was on his feet. He too had a pistol that was pointed at me. I was trapped.

'The Carrolls of London say hello,' said the first drunk, the older and more barrel-chested of the two, obviously the boss, and I was hit with the blank fact of the inevitable. We knew the Carrolls would come for us, sooner or later. Be ready, we'd said, and maybe we thought we were ready.

'So what are you waiting for then?' I asked.

'The instructions are that you're to suffer before you die,' said the boss evenly and without real malice. 'Plus the bounty is for you, a certain Frederick Weatherall and your lady's maid, Hélène. We thought that extracting their

whereabouts and causing you to suffer might well be combined, a sort of killing-two-birds-with-one-stone arrangement.'

I smiled back at him. 'You can cause me as much pain as you like, cause me all the pain in the world, I won't tell you.'

From behind me, his friend made an 'Aw' sound. The kind of sound you make when you see a particularly appealing puppy playing with a ball.

The boss inclined his head. 'He's laughing because they all say that. Everyone we've ever tortured says it. It's around the time we introduce the hungry rats that they begin to doubt the wisdom of their words.'

I looked theatrically around me, turned back to him and smiled. 'I don't see any hungry rats.'

'Well, that's because we haven't started yet. It's a long old process what we have in mind. Mrs Carroll was very specific about that.'

'She still angry about May, is she?'

'She did say to remind you about May during the process. That's her daughter, I assume.'

'Was, yes.'

'And you killed her?'

'Yes.'

'Had it coming, did she?'

'I would say she did, yes. She was about to kill me.'

'Self-defence then?'

'You might say that. Does knowing that change your mind at all?'

He grinned. The pistol never wavered. 'No. It just tells me you're a tricky one and I'll need to watch you. So why don't we start with the sword and the pistol? Drop them both on the floor, if you would.'

I did as I was told.

'Now step away from them. Turn, face the banister, put your hands on your head and know that while Mr Hook here is checking you for concealed weapons I'll be covering him with the pistols. I'd like you to remember that Mr Hook and I are aware of your capabilities, Miss de la Serre. We haven't made the mistake of underestimating you because you're young and female. Isn't that right, Mr Hook?'

'That's right, Mr Harvey,' said Hook.

'That's reassuring to know,' I said, and with a glance towards Mr Hook, I did as I was told, moving to the banister and putting my hands to my head.

The light was dim in the entrance hall, and though my two genial killers would have taken that into account, it was still in my favour.

Something else I had in my favour: I had nothing to lose.

Hook was behind me now. He moved my weapons into the middle of the hall before returning, staying a few feet away. ‘Remove your jacket,’ he said.

‘I beg your pardon.’

‘You heard the man,’ said Mr Harvey. ‘Remove your jacket.’

‘I’ll have to take my hands off my head.’

‘Just take off the jacket.’

I unbuttoned it and shrugged it to the floor.

In the room was a dense silence. Mr Hook’s eyes roamed over me. ‘Untuck your shirt,’ said Mr Harvey.

‘You’re not going to make me …?’

‘Just untuck the shirt and gather it at the waist so we can see the waistband.’

I did as I was asked.

‘Now remove your boots.’

I knelt, straight away thinking I could use a boot as a weapon. But no. As soon as I attacked Hook, Harvey would plug me with the pistol. I needed a different tactic.

With the boots off I stood in my stockinged feet, shirt untucked for inspection.

‘Right,’ said Harvey. ‘Turn round. Hands back on your head. Remember what I said about having you covered.’

I resumed my position facing the banister as Hook came up behind me. He knelt, his hands reached to my feet and his hands began a journey from the tips of my toes up my breeches. At the top, they lingered …

‘Hook …’ warned Harvey.

‘Got to be thorough,’ said Hook, and I could tell from the direction of his voice that he was looking towards Harvey as he said it, which gave me a chance. A tiny chance, but a chance all the same. And I took it.

I jumped, grabbed a banister strut, and in the same movement gripped Hook’s neck between my thighs and twisted. I twisted hard, trying to break his neck at the same time, but breaking men’s necks in a scissor hold was never a major part of Mr Weatherall’s training and I didn’t have the strength to wrench his neck hard enough. Even so, he was now between me and the pistol, which was my first objective. His face reddened, his hands at my thighs trying to free himself as I squeezed, hoping I might be able to exert enough pressure to black him out.

No such luck. He writhed and pulled and I clung on to the strut for dear life, feeling my body lengthen and the wood begin to give way as he tried to pull away. Harvey, meanwhile, cursed, holstered his pistol and drew a short sword.

With a shout of effort I increased the pressure of my thighs and jerked upwards at the same time. The banister splintered and came off in my hands as I

flipped upright and for a second was riding Hook like a girl on her daddy's shoulders, looking down upon a suddenly astonished Harvey, the strut held high.

It swept down. I plunged it into Harvey's face.

What bits of the banister strut went into what bits of Harvey's face, I couldn't say for sure, and don't particularly want to know.

All I can tell you is that I aimed for an eye, and though the strut was too thick to penetrate the socket, well, it did the job, because one moment he was advancing on us with his short sword ready to attack, the next he had an eye full of banister strut and was wheeling off, his hands at his face, filling the final seconds of his life with bloodcurdling screams.

With a twist of my hips I brought myself and Hook crashing to the floor. We landed badly but I pulled myself away, throwing myself bodily towards my sword and pistol in the centre of the floor. My pistol was primed and ready, but then so was Hook's. All I could do was dive for my gun and pray I reached it before he recovered enough to reach for his.

I got there, whirled on to my back and held it two-handed on him – at exactly the same time as he did the same. For the briefest second we both had the drop on one another.

And then the door opened, a voice said, 'Élise,' and Hook flinched. So I fired.

There was perhaps half a second during which I thought I'd missed Hook entirely, before blood began gushing from his lips, his head dropped and I realized I'd shot him through the mouth.

vii.

'It looks like I arrived just in time,' Ruddock said later, after we had carried the bodies of Hook and Harvey out through the rear courtyard and into the street where we left them among the broken crates and barrels and upturned carts. Inside we found a bottle of wine in the pantry, lit candles and sat in the housekeeper's study where we could keep an eye on the back stairs, just in case anybody returned.

I poured us a glass each and pushed one across the table to him. It went without saying that he looked much healthier than he had the last time we met, since he'd been swinging on the end of a rope back then, but even taking that into account he had recovered a bearing, too. He looked more self-possessed. For the first time since our meeting in '75, I could imagine Ruddock as an Assassin.

'What did they want, your two friends?' he asked.

'To exact revenge on behalf of a third party.'

‘I see. You’ve upset someone, have you?’

‘Well, obviously.’

‘Yes, quite. I suspect you do your fair share of upsetting people, do you? As I say, it was lucky I arrived in time.’

‘Don’t flatter yourself. I had it covered,’ I said, sipping my wine.

‘Well, then I’m very pleased to hear it,’ he said. ‘Only it looked to me as though it could have gone either way, and that my entrance gave you the element of surprise you needed in order to gain the advantage.’

‘Don’t push your luck, Ruddock,’ I said.

The truth was that I was amazed to see him at all. But whether he’d taken my threat to hunt him down seriously or he was a more honourable man than I’d taken him for, the fact was he had come. Not just that, but he’d come with what you might call ‘news’.

‘You’ve found something?’

‘Indeed I have.’

‘The identity of the man who hired you to kill me and my mother?’

He looked abashed and cleared his throat. ‘I was only hired to kill your mother, you know. Not you.’

I fought a wave of unreality. Sitting in my family’s wrecked villa, sharing wine with a man who openly admitted trying to kill my mother, who, if all had gone to plan, would no doubt have left me alone and crying over her body.

I poured more wine, choosing to drink, don’t think, because if I thought then maybe I might wonder how I got to be so numb that I could drink with this man, that I could think of Arno and feel no emotion, how I could cheat death and feel nothing.

Ruddock continued. ‘And the fact is I don’t know exactly who it was who hired me, but I do know to whom he was affiliated.’

‘And who might that be?’

‘Have you ever heard of the King of Beggars?’

‘No, I can’t say that I have – but that is the person to whom your man is affiliated?’

‘As far as I can tell, it was the King of Beggars who wanted your mother dead.’

That strange wave of unreality again. Hearing it from the man who was hired to carry out the job.

‘The question is why,’ I said, taking a gulp of wine.

‘Steady on,’ he said, and reached to touch a hand to my arm. I stopped, the beaker still held to my lips, glaring at his hand until he took it back.

‘Don’t touch me again,’ I said, ‘*ever*.’

‘I’m sorry,’ he said. His eyes dropped. ‘I meant no offence. It’s just that – you seem to be drinking too swiftly, that’s all.’

‘Haven’t you heard the rumours?’ I said ironically, ‘I’m a drunk of some repute. And I can quite handle my wine, thank you.’

‘I only want to help, mademoiselle,’ he said. ‘It’s the least I can do. By saving my life you’ve given me a new outlook. I am trying to make something of myself now.’

‘I’m pleased for you. But if I thought that saving your life meant you were going to lecture me about the wine I was drinking, then I wouldn’t have bothered.’

He nodded. ‘Again, I’m sorry.’

I took another gulp of wine, just to spite him. ‘Now tell me what you know about the King of Beggars.’

‘That he is a difficult man to find. The Assassins have tried to kill him in the past.’

I cocked an eyebrow. ‘You were working for a sworn enemy of the Assassins? I take it you’ll be keeping that fact quiet?’

He looked ashamed. ‘Indeed. They were different, more desperate days, my lady.’

I waved that away. ‘So the Assassins have tried to kill him. Why would that be?’

‘He is cruel. He rules over the beggars in the city who are forced to pay him a tribute. It is said that if the tribute is insufficient then the King of Beggars has a man named La Touche amputate their limbs, because the good people of Paris are likely to donate more generously to a beggar deprived in such a way.’

I fought a wave of disgust. ‘For that reason Assassin and Templar would *both* want him dead, surely? He is a friend to no one.’ I curled my lip at him. ‘Or are you saying that only the good-hearted Assassins wanted him dead, while we black-hearted Templars turned a blind eye?’

With a studied look of sadness he said, ‘Would I be in any position to make moral judgements, my lady? But the fact is that if the Templars do turn a blind eye to his activities, it is because he is one of them.’

‘Nonsense. We would have nothing to do with such a disgusting man. My father wouldn’t have allowed him in the Order.’

Ruddock shrugged and spread his hands. ‘I’m dreadfully sorry if what I’m telling you comes as a shock, my lady. Perhaps you should not take it as a reflection on your entire Order, rather than rogue elements within it. Speaking as something of a “rogue element” myself …’

Rogue elements, I thought. Rogue elements who plotted against my mother. Were these the same people who killed my father? If so, then I was next.

‘You want to rejoin the Assassins, do you?’ I said, pouring more wine.

He nodded.

I grinned. ‘Well, look, I’ve got to say, and you’ll have to pardon my rudeness, but you did attempt to kill me once so I think I’m owed a free shot. But if you’ve got any hopes of rejoining the Assassins, you need to take care of that smell.’

‘The smell?’

‘Yes, Ruddock, the smell. Your smell. You smelled in London, you smelled in Rouen and you smell now. Perhaps a bath might be in order? Some perfume? Now, is that rude?’

He smiled. ‘Not at all, mademoiselle, I appreciate your candour.’

‘Why you’d want to rejoin the Assassins is beyond me anyway.’

‘Begging your pardon, mademoiselle?’

I leaned forward, squinting at him and waggling the beaker of wine at the same time. ‘I mean I’d think very carefully about that if I were you.’

‘What can you mean?’

I waved an airy hand. ‘I mean that you’re out of it. *Well* out of it. Free of all that –’ I waved a hand again – ‘*stuff*. Assassin. Templar. Pah. They’ve got enough dogma for ten thousand churches and twice as much misguided belief. For centuries they’ve done nothing but squabble, and to what end, eh? Mankind carries on regardless. Look at France. My father and his advisors spent years arguing over the “best” direction for the country and in the end the revolution went ahead and happened without them anyway. Ha! Where was Mirabeau when they stormed the Bastille? Still taking votes on tennis courts? The Assassins and Templars are like two ticks fighting over control of the cat, an exercise in hubris and futility.’

‘But, mademoiselle, whatever the eventual outcome we have to believe we have the capacity to effect change for the better.’

‘Only if we’re deluded, Ruddock,’ I said. ‘Only if we’re deluded.’

viii.

After I had dismissed Ruddock, I decided I would be ready for them if they came, whoever *they* were: looting revolutionaries, agents of the Carrolls, a traitor from my own Order. I would be ready for them.

Luckily there is more than enough wine in the house to fortify me for the wait.

25 July 1789

It was daylight when they came. They stole into the courtyard, the noise of their footfalls reaching me where I waited in the darkened, boarded-up hall, a pistol at hand.

I, who had waited, was ready for them. And as they climbed the steps to the door that I had deliberately left ajar, just as I did every day, I reached for the pistol, pulled back the hammer and raised it.

The door creaked. A shadow fell into a rectangle of sunlight on the floorboards and lengthened across the floor as a figure crossed the threshold and came into the gloom of my home.

'Élise,' he said, and dimly I realized that it was a long, long time since I had heard another human voice, and how sweet the sound of it was. And what bliss that the voice should belong to him.

Then I remembered that he could have saved my father, and didn't, and that he had fallen in with the Assassins. And, now I came to think of it, perhaps those two facts were connected? And even if they weren't …

I lit a lamp, still holding the gun on him, pleased to see him jump slightly as the flame blazed into life. For some moments the two of us simply regarded one another, faces conveying nothing, until he nodded, indicating the pistol.

'That's some welcome.'

I softened a little to see his face. Just a little. 'One can't be too careful. Not after what happened.'

'Élise, I …'

'Haven't you done enough to repay my father's kindness?' I said sharply.

'Élise, please. You can't believe I killed Monsieur de la Serre. Your father … he wasn't the man you thought he was. Neither of our fathers was.'

Secrets. How I hated the taste of them. *Vérités cachées*. All my life.

'I know exactly who my father was, Arno. And I know who yours was. I suppose it was inevitable. You an Assassin, me a Templar.'

I watched the realization slowly dawn on his face. 'You …?' he began, his words faltering.

I nodded. ‘Does that shock you? My father always meant for me to follow in his footsteps. Now all I can do is avenge him.’

‘I swear to you I had nothing to do with his death.’

‘Oh, but you did …’

‘No. No. By my life, I swear I didn’t …’

To hand was the letter. I held it up now.

‘Is that …?’ he asked, squinting at it.

‘A letter intended for my father the day he was murdered. I found it on the floor of his room. Unopened.’

I almost felt sorry for Arno, watching the blood drain from his face as it dawned on him what he’d done. After all, he had loved Father too. Yes, I almost felt sorry for him. *Almost*.

Arno’s mouth worked up and down. His eyes were wide and staring.

‘I didn’t know,’ he said at last.

‘Neither did my father,’ I said simply.

‘How could I have known?’

‘Just go,’ I told him. I hated the sound of the sob in my voice. I hated Arno. ‘Just go.’

And he did. And I barred the door behind him, and then took the back stairs down to the housekeeper’s study, where I had made my bed. There I opened a bottle of wine. All the better to help me sleep.

20 August 1789

i.

Shaken awake, I blinked blurry, bloodshot eyes and tried to focus on the man who stood above my bed, crutches under his armpits. It looked like Mr Weatherall, but it couldn't be Mr Weatherall because my protector was in Versailles and he couldn't travel, not with his leg the way it was. And I wasn't in Versailles, I was in Île Saint-Louis in Paris, waiting – waiting for something.

'Right, you,' he was saying, 'I see you're already dressed. Time to get out of your cot and come with us.'

Behind him stood another man, who lurked uneasily by the door of the housekeeper's study. For a second I thought it was Jacques from Maison Royale, but no, it was another, younger man.

And it *was* him – it was Mr Weatherall. I shot upright, clasped him by the neck and pulled him to me, sobbing gratefully into his neck, holding him tight

'Hold up,' he said in a strangulated voice, 'you're pulling me off my bloody crutches. Just wait a minute, will you?'

I let him go and pulled myself up to my knees. 'But we can't go,' I said firmly. 'I need to be ready, when they come for me.

'When who comes for you?'

I gripped his collars, looked up at him, into that bearded face creased with concern, and didn't want to ever let him go. 'The Carrolls sent killers, Mr Weatherall. They sent two men to kill me for what I did to May Carroll.'

His shoulders slumped on to his crutches as he embraced me. 'Oh God, child. When?'

'I killed them,' I went on breathlessly. 'I killed them both. I put a wooden stake into one of them.' I giggled.

He pulled away, looking deep into my eyes, frowning. 'And then celebrated with a couple of hundred bottles of wine, by the looks of things.'

I shook my head. 'No. Only to help me sleep, to help forget that … that I've lost Arno, and my father, and what I did to May Carroll, and the two men who came to kill me.' I began to sob now, giggling one second, sobbing the next,

dimly realizing that this was not normal behaviour but unable to stop myself. ‘I put a stake into one of them.’

‘Right,’ he said and then turned to the other man. ‘Help her to the carriage, carry her if needs be. She’s not herself.’

‘I’m fine,’ I insisted.

‘You will be,’ he said. ‘This young man here is Jean Burnel. Like you, he’s a newly inducted Templar, though, unlike you, he isn’t Grand Master and he isn’t drunk. However, he is loyal to the La Serre name, and he can help us. But he can’t do that until you’re on your feet.’

‘My trunk,’ I said. ‘I need my trunk …’

ii.

That was – well, the truth is, I don’t know how long ago that was, and I’m embarrassed to ask. All I know is that since then I’ve been confined to bed in the groundsman’s lodge, perspiring profusely for the first few days, insisting I was going to be okay, getting angry when I was denied a little wine to drink; then after that sleeping a lot, my head clearing enough to understand that I had been in the grip of some dark fugue – a ‘disorder of the nerves’, Mr Weatherall had said.

iii.

At last I was well enough to get out of bed and dress in clothes that had been freshly laundered by Hélène, who was indeed an angel, and who had as expected formed a strong relationship with Jacques during my absence. Then Mr Weatherall and I left the lodge one morning and walked in near-silence, both of us knowing we were heading for our usual place, and there we stood in the clearing where the sun fell through the branches like a waterfall, and we bathed in it.

‘Thank you,’ I said, when at last we sat, Mr Weatherall on the stump, me on the soft floor of the copse, absent-mindedly picking at the ground and squinting up at him.

‘Thank you for what?’ he said. That growly voice I loved so much.

‘Thank you for saving me.’

‘Thank you for saving you from yourself, you mean.’

I smiled. ‘Saving me from myself is still saving me.’

‘If you say so. I had my own difficulties when your mother died. Hit the bottle myself.’

I remembered – I remembered the smell of wine on his breath at the Maison Royale.

‘There is a traitor within the Order,’ I said next.

‘We thought as much. Lafrenière’s letter …’

‘But now I am more sure. His name is the King of Beggars.’

‘The King of Beggars?’

‘You know him?’

He nodded. ‘I know *of* him. He isn’t a Templar.’

‘That’s what I said. But Ruddock insists.’

Mr Weatherall’s eyes blazed at the mention of Ruddock’s name. ‘Nonsense. Your father would never have allowed it.’

‘That was exactly what I told Ruddock, but perhaps Father didn’t know?’

‘Your father knew everything.’

‘Can the King of Beggars have been inducted since?’

‘After your father’s murder?’

I nodded. ‘Perhaps even *because* of my father’s murder – as payment for carrying it out, a reward.’

‘You’ve got a point there,’ said Mr Weatherall. ‘You say Ruddock was hired by the King of Beggars to kill your mother, maybe to curry favour with the Crows?’

‘That’s right.’

‘Well, he failed, didn’t he? Perhaps he’s been biding his time since, waiting for another opportunity to prove himself. Kills your father, finally gets what he wants – an initiation.’

I considered. ‘Maybe, but it doesn’t make an awful lot of sense to me, and I still can’t understand why the Crows would want Mother dead. If anything, her third way was a bridge between the two sets of ideals.’

‘She was too strong for them, Élise. Too much of a threat.’

‘A threat to whom, Mr Weatherall? On whose authority is all this happening?’

We shared a look.

‘Listen, Élise,’ he said, pointing, ‘you need to consolidate. You need to call a special meeting and assert your leadership, let the bloody Order know whose hand is on the tiller, and root out whoever it is that’s working against you.’

I felt myself go cold. ‘What you’re saying is that it’s not just one individual, it’s a faction?’

‘Why not? In the last month we’ve seen the rule of a remote and disinterested king overthrown by revolution.’

I frowned at him. ‘And that’s what you think I am, do you? A “remote and disinterested” ruler?’

‘I don’t think that. But maybe there are others who do.’

I agreed. ‘You’re right. I need to rally my supporters around me. I shall host the gathering at the estate in Versailles, beneath portraits of my mother and father.’

He raised his eyebrows. ‘Yes, all right. Let’s not run before we can walk, eh? We need to make sure they’ll turn up first. Young Jean Burnel can begin the task of alerting members.’

‘I need him to sound out Lafrenière as well. What I’ve learnt gives his letter even more credence.’

‘Yes, well, you just be careful.’

‘How did you recruit Jean Burnel?’

Mr Weatherall coloured a little. ‘Well, you know, I just did.’

‘Mr Weatherall …’ I pressed.

He shrugged. ‘All right, well, look, I have my network, as you know, and I happened to surmise that young Burnel would jump at the chance to work closely with the beautiful Élise de la Serre.’

I smiled my way through an uneasy, disloyal feeling. ‘So he’s sweet on me?’

‘It’s the icing on the cake of his loyalty to your family, I’d say, but yes, I suppose he is.’

‘I see. Perhaps he would make a good match.’

He guffawed. ‘Oh who are you kidding, child? You love Arno.’

‘Do I?’

‘Well, don’t you?’

‘There’s been a lot of hurt.’

‘Could be that he feels the same way. After all, you kept some pretty big secrets from him. Could be he’s got just as much right as you to be feeling like the injured party.’ He leaned forward. ‘You ought to start thinking of what you have in common rather than what separates you. You might find that one outweighs the other.’

‘I don’t know,’ I said, turning my face away. ‘I don’t really know any more.’

5 October 1789

i.

I have written before that the fall of the Bastille marked the end of the king's rule and though it did in one sense – in the sense that his power had been questioned, tested and failed that test – in name at least, if not in reality, he remained in charge.

As news of the Bastille's fall began to travel around France, so too did the rumour that the king's army would wreak a terrible revenge on all revolutionaries. Messengers would arrive in villages with the dreadful news that the army was sweeping across the countryside. They pointed to the sunset and said it was a burning village in the distance. Peasants took up arms against an army that never came. They burned tax offices. They fought with local militia sent to quell the disturbance.

On the back of it, the Assembly passed a law, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, to stop nobles demanding taxes, tithes and labour from peasants. The law was drafted by the Marquis de Lafayette, who had helped draft the American Constitution, and it killed noble privilege and made all men equal in the eyes of the law.

It also made the guillotine the official instrument of death of France.

ii.

But what to do with the king? Officially he still had power of veto. Mirabeau, who had so nearly formed an alliance with my father, argued that the protests should end, and that the king should rule as he had done before.

In this aim he would have been joined by my father had my father lived, and when I wondered whether an alliance of Assassins and Templars might have changed things I found myself sure it would have done, and realized that was why he had been killed.

There were others – chief among them the doctor and scientist Jean-Paul Marat, who, though not a member of the Assembly, had found a voice – and felt

that the king's powers should be stripped away from him altogether, that he should be asked to move from Versailles to Paris and there continue purely in an advisory role.

Marat's view was the most radical. As far as I was concerned that was important, because not once did I ever hear talk of the king being deposed, as I had overheard growing up.

Put it another way. The most passionate revolutionaries in Paris had never proposed anything quite so radical as that suggested by my father's advisors at our estate in Versailles as far back as 1778.

And realizing that sent a chill down my spine as the day of the Templar council approached. The Crows had been invited, of course, although I was going to have to stop using that nickname for them if I was to be their Grand Master. What I should say is that eleven of my father's close associates and advisors had been requested to attend, as well as representatives of other high-ranking Templar families.

When they were assembled I would tell them I was in charge now. I would warn them that treachery would not be tolerated and that if my father's killer came from their ranks then he (or she) would be exposed and punished.

That was the plan. And in private moments I imagined it happening that way. I imagined the meeting taking place at our chateau in Versailles, just as I'd said to Mr Weatherall that day at Maison Royale.

In the end, however, we'd decided more neutral territory would be preferable, and chosen to meet at the Hôtel de Lauzun on the Île Saint-Louis. It was owned by the Marquis de Pimôdan, a knight of the Order known to be sympathetic to the La Serres. So not totally neutral. But *more* neutral at least.

Mr Weatherall demurred, insisting on the need to maintain a low profile. I'm grateful for that, the way things turned out.

iii.

Something had happened that day. These days it felt as though something happened every day, but that day – or to be precise yesterday and today – something bigger than usual had happened, an event for which the wheels were set in motion when, just a few days ago, King Louis and Marie Antoinette drank too much wine at a party held in honour of the Flanders regiment.

The story goes that the royal couple, while making merry, ceremonially trampled on a revolutionary cockade, while others at the party had turned the cockade round to display its white side, considered an anti-revolution stance.

So arrogant. So stupid. In their actions the king and his wife reminded me of the noble woman and her groom on the day the Bastille fell, still clinging to the old ways. And of course the moderates, the likes of Mirabeau and Lafayette, must have been throwing up their hands in disbelief and frustration at the monarch's thoughtlessness, because the king's actions played right into the hands of the radicals. The people were hungry and the king had thrown a banquet. Worse, he had trampled on a symbol of the revolution.

The revolution leaders called for a march on Versailles and thousands of them, mainly women, made the journey from Paris to Versailles. Guards who fired on the protestors were beheaded and, as ever, their heads raised on pikes.

It was the Marquis de Lafayette who convinced the king to speak to the crowd, and his appearance was followed by Marie Antoinette, whose bravery in facing the crowd seemed to defuse much of their fury.

After that the king and queen were taken from Versailles to Paris. Their journey took them nine hours, and once in Paris they were installed at the Tuileries Palace. The event put the city in as much tumult as it had experienced since the fall of the Bastille three months before, and the streets thronged with troops and sans-culottes, men, women and children. They filled the Pont Marie as Jean Burnel and I made our way across the bridge, having abandoned our carriage and decided to reach the Hôtel de Lauzun on foot.

'Are you nervous, Élise?' he asked me, his face shining with excitement and pride.

'I would ask that you address me as Grand Master, please,' I told him.

'I'm sorry.'

'And no, I'm not nervous. Leading the Order is my birthright. Those members in attendance will find in me a renewed passion for leadership. I may be young, I may be a woman, but I intend to be the Grand Master the Order deserves.'

I felt him swell with pride on my behalf and I chewed my lip, which was something I did when I was nervous, which I was.

Despite what I'd said to Jean, who was way too much like an obedient and lovelorn puppy for his own good, I was, as Mr Weatherall would say, 'Shaking like a shitting dog.'

'I wish I could be there,' he'd said, although we'd agreed it best he remained behind. His pep talk had begun as I presented myself for inspection.

'Whatever you do, don't expect miracles,' he'd said. 'If you get the advisors and, say, five or six other members of the Order, that will be enough to swing the Order in your direction. And don't forget you've left it a long time to go in there and start demanding your birthright. By all means use the shock of your father's death as a reason for your tardiness but don't expect it to be the medicine that

cures all ills. You owe the Order an apology, so you best start off contrite, and don't forget you'll need to fight your corner. You'll be treated with respect but you're young, you're a woman and you've been neglectful. Calls to take you to trial won't be taken seriously but then they won't be ridiculed either.'

I looked at him with wide eyes. ' "Taken to trial"?'

'No. Didn't I just say they wouldn't be taken seriously?'

'Yes, but then after that you said –'

'I know what I said after that,' he said testily, 'and what you have to remember is that for a period of several months you've left the Order without firm leadership – during a time of revolution to boot. La Serre or not. Birthright or not. That fact won't play well. All you can do is hope.'

I was ready to leave.

'Right, are you clear on everything?' he asked, leaning on his crutches to remove fluff from the shoulder of my jacket. I checked my sword and pistol, then shrugged an overcoat on top, hiding my weapons and Templar garb, then pulled my hair back and added a tricorn.

'I think so.' I smiled through a deep, nervous breath. 'I need to be contrite, not overconfident, grateful for whoever shows their support –' I stopped. 'How many have pledged their attendance?'

'Young Burnel has had twelve "ayes", including our friends the Crows. It's the first time I've known a Grand Master call a meeting in such a fashion so you can depend on there being a few there out of curiosity alone, but then that could work to your advantage.'

I stood on tiptoes to give him a kiss then stepped out into the night, darting across to where the carriage waited with Jean in the driving seat. Mr Weatherall had been right about Jean. Yes, he was definitely smitten but he was loyal and he'd worked tirelessly to rally support for the summit. His aim, of course, was to win a place in my favour and become one of my advisors, but that hardly made him unique. I thought of the Crows and remembered their smiles and whispers when I had returned for my induction; the suspicion that now swirled around them; the presence of this King of Beggars.

'Élise …' Mr Weatherall had called from the door.

I turned. Impatiently he motioned me back and I called to Jean to wait and ran back. 'Yes?'

He was serious. 'Look at me, child, look into these eyes and remember that you're worthy of this. You're the best warrior I've ever trained. You've got the brains and charm of your mother and father combined. You can do this. You can lead the Order.'

For that he got another kiss before I darted off again.

Glancing back at the house to give a final wave I saw Hélène and Jacques framed in a window, and at the door of the carriage I turned, swept my hat off my head and gave them a theatrical bow.

I felt good. Nervous but good. It was time to set things right.

iv.

And now Jean Burnel and I made our way over the Pont Marie, dark but lit by the bobbing torches of the crowd, and came to the Île Saint-Louis. I thought of my family's villa, deserted and neglected nearby, but put it out of my mind. As we walked, Jean stayed by my side, his hand beneath his coat ready to draw his sword if we were accosted. Meanwhile, I kept a hopeful eye out, wanting to see other knights of the Order in the crowds, also making their way towards the Lauzun.

It seems funny to relate now – and by that I mean 'funny' in an ironic sense – but as we approached the venue there was a part of me that dared to hope for a grand turnout – a huge, historical show of support for the La Serre name. And though it now seems fanciful to have thought it, especially with the benefit of hindsight, at the time, well … why not? My father was a beloved leader. The La Serres a respected family dynasty. Perhaps an order in need of leadership would turn out for me, to honour the legacy of my father's name.

Like everywhere else on the isle the street outside the Lauzun was busy. A large wooden door with a smaller wicket entrance was set into a high wall overgrown with ivy, which surrounded a courtyard. I looked up and down the thoroughfare, seeing dozens and dozens of people, but none who were dressed as we were on their way here.

Jean looked at me. He'd been quiet since I gave him the dressing-down and I felt bad about that now, especially when I saw his own nerves and knew they were nerves for me.

'Are you ready, Grand Master?' he asked.

'I am, thank you, Jean,' I replied.

'Then, please, allow me to knock.'

The door was opened by a manservant elegantly attired in a waistcoat and white gloves. The sight of him, with his embroidered ceremonial sash at his waist, gave me a lift. I was in the right place at least, and they were ready for me.

Bowing his head he stepped aside to allow us into the courtyard. There I looked about me, seeing boarded-up windows and balconies around a neglected central space littered with dried leaves, overturned plant pots and a number of splintered crates.

In different times a fountain might have been delicately tinkling and the sound of evening birdsong providing a peaceful end to another civilized day at the Hôtel de Lauzun, but not any more.

Now there was just Jean and me, the manservant, and the Marquis de Pimôdan, who had been standing to one side, attired in his robes and with his hands clasped in front of him, who now came forward to greet us.

'Pimôdan,' I said warmly. We embraced. I kissed his cheeks and, still encouraged by the sight of our host and his manservant in their Templar garb, allowed myself to believe that my pre-meeting flutters were for nothing. That everything was going to be all right, even that the apparent quiet was nothing more than a custom of the Order.

But then, as Pimôdan said, 'It is an honour, Grand Master,' his words sounded hollow and he turned quickly away to lead us across the courtyard and my pre-meeting flutters returned tenfold.

I glanced at Jean, who pulled a face, unnerved by the situation.

'Are the others assembled, Pimôdan?' I asked, as we made our way to a set of double doors leading into the main building. The manservant opened them and ushered us in.

'The room is ready for you, Grand Master,' Pimôdan replied evasively as we stepped over the threshold into a darkened dining room with boarded-up windows and sheets over the furniture.

The manservant closed the double doors, then waited there, allowing Pimôdan to lead us across the floor to a thick, almost ornamental door in the far wall.

'Yes, but which members are in attendance?' I asked. The words were croaky. My throat was dry.

He said nothing in response, but gripped a large iron ring on the door and turned it. The *chunk* sound it made was like a pistol shot.

'Monsieur Pimôdan …' I prompted.

The door opened out on to stone steps leading down, the way lit by flickering torches bolted to the walls. Orange flames danced on rough stone walls.

'Come,' said Pimôdan, still ignoring me. He was clutching something, I realized. A crucifix.

And that was it. I'd had enough.

'*Stop*,' I commanded.

Pimôdan was taking another step as though he hadn't heard me, but I whipped back my overcoat, drew my sword and put the point of it to the back of his neck. And that stopped him. Behind me Jean Burnel drew his sword.

'Who's down there, Pimôdan?' I demanded to know. 'Friend or foe?'

Silence.

‘Don’t test me, Pimôdan,’ I growled, prodding his neck, ‘if I’m mistaken then I’ll offer you my most humble apologies, but until that time I have a feeling that there’s something very wrong here, and I want to know why.’

Pimôdan’s shoulders heaved as he sighed, as though about to throw off the yoke of a huge secret. ‘It’s because there’s nobody here, mademoiselle.’

I went cold and heard a strange whining noise in my ears as I struggled to understand. ‘What? *Nobody?*’

‘Nobody.’

I half turned to Jean Burnel, who stared, unable to believe his own ears. ‘What about the Marquis de Kilmister?’ I asked. ‘Jean-Jacques Calvert and his father? The Marquis de Simonon?’

Pimôdan inclined his neck away from my blade to shake his head slowly.

‘Pimôdan?’ I insisted, nudging it back, ‘*Where are my supporters?*’

He spread his hands. ‘All I know is that there was an attack by sans-culottes at the Calvert chateau this morning,’ he said. ‘Both Jean-Jacques and his father perished in a fire. Of the others, I know nothing.’

My blood ran cold. To Burnel I said, ‘A purge. This is a purge.’ Then to Pimôdan: ‘And below? Are my killers waiting for me below?’

Now he turned a little in the stairwell. ‘No, mademoiselle,’ he said, ‘there is nothing down there save for some documents in need of your attention.’

But as he said it, staring back up at me with wide, craven eyes, he nodded. And it was a crumb of comfort, I suppose, that a last vestige of loyalty remained in this cowardly man, that at least he wasn’t going to allow me to descend the steps into a pit of killers.

I whirled round, bundled Jean Burnel back up the steps, then slammed the door behind us and threw the bolt. The manservant had remained by the double doors in the dining room, a look on his face as though he were bemused by the sudden turn of events. As Jean and I rushed across the floor, I drew my pistol and aimed at him, wishing I could shoot the supercilious look off his face but settling instead for gesturing for him to open the doors.

He did, and we stepped out of the hotel and into the dark courtyard beyond.

The doors closed behind us. Call it a sixth sense but I knew something was wrong immediately, and in the next instant I felt a sudden tightening around my neck. I knew exactly what it was.

They were catgut ligatures, dropped with precision from a balcony above. In my case, not perfect precision – caught by the collar of my coat, the noose didn’t tighten straight away, giving me precious seconds to react, while by my side Jean Burnel’s Assassin had achieved a flawless drop and in a heartbeat the ligature was cutting into the flesh of his neck.

In his panic Burnel dropped his sword. His hands scrabbled for the tightening noose round his neck and a snorting noise escaped his nostrils as his face began to colour and his eyes boggled. As he was lifted by the neck his body stretched and the tips of his boots scrabbled at the ground.

I swung for Burnel's ligature with my sword, but at the same time my own attacker pulled sharply to the side and I was yanked away from him, helpless, to see his tongue protrude from his mouth and his eyeballs seeming to bulge impossibly as he was hoisted even higher. Pulling back on my own ligature, I looked up and saw dark shadows on the balcony above, operating us like two puppeteers.

But I was lucky – *lucky, lucky Élise* – because although the breath was choked out of me my collar was still wedged and it gave me enough presence of mind to swing again with my sword, only this time not at Jean Burnel's ligature – for he was out of reach now, his feet kicking in their death throes – but at my own.

I severed it and crumpled to the ground on my hands and knees, gasping for breath but rolling on to my back at the same time, reaching for my pistol and thumbing back the hammer, aiming it two-handed at the balcony above and firing.

The shot echoed around the courtyard and had an instant effect, Jean Burnel's body dropping like a sack to the ground as his ligature was released, his face a hideous death mask, and the two figures on the balcony disappearing from view, the attack over – for the time being.

From inside the building I heard shouts and the sound of running feet. Through the glass of the double doors I swear I could see the manservant, standing well back in the shadows watching me as I scrambled to my feet. I wondered how many there were, counting the two balcony killers, maybe another two or three killers from the cellar. To my left another door burst open and two thugs in the clothes of sans-culottes burst out.

Oh. So two more elsewhere in the house as well.

There was the sound of a shot and a pistol ball split the air by the side of my head. There was no time to reload my own gun. No time to do anything but run.

I ran for where a bench was inset into a side wall, shaded by a large courtyard tree. I bounded, hit the bench and with my leading foot propelled myself upwards, finding a low branch and thumping messily against the trunk.

From behind me came a shout and a second pistol shot, and I hugged the tree trunk as the ball embedded itself into the wood between two splayed fingers. *Lucky, Élise, very lucky*. I started to climb. Hands scrabbled at my boot but I kicked out, blindly heading upwards in the hope of reaching the top of the wall.

I reached it and stepped across from the tree. But when I looked down I found myself staring into the grinning faces of two men who'd used the gate and were waiting for me. Grinning up at me with huge 'got you' grins.

They were thinking that they were below me, and that there were other men coming up behind me, and that I was trapped. They were thinking it was all over.

So I did what they least expected. I jumped on them.

I'm not big but I was wearing devilish boots and wielding a sword, and I had the element of surprise on my side. I speared one of them on the way down, impaling him through the face and then, without retrieving my blade, pivoted and delivered a high kick to the throat of the second man. He dropped to his knees with his hands at his neck, already turning purple. I retrieved my sword from the face of the first man – and plunged it into his chest.

There was more shouting from behind. Over my head, faces had appeared at the top of the wall. I took to my heels, pushing my way into the crowd. Behind me were two pursuers doing the same, and I pushed further on, ignoring the curses of the people I shoved, just surging forward. At the bridge I stayed by a low wall.

And then I heard the shout. 'A traitor. A traitor to the revolution. Don't let the red-headed woman escape.'

And the shout was taken up by another of my pursuers. 'Get her! Get the red-headed bint.'

Another: 'A traitor to the revolution!'

Then: 'She spits on the *tricolore*.'

It took a minute or so for the message to spread through the crowd but gradually I saw heads turn to me, people noticing my finer clothes for the first time, their gaze moving pointedly to my hair. My *red* hair.

'*You*,' said a man, 'it's you,' and then he shouted, 'We have her! We have the traitor!'

Below me on the river was a barge crawling under the bridge, goods covered with sacking on the foredeck. What goods they were, I didn't know, and could only pray that they were the 'soft' kind, that might break your fall if you were jumping from a bridge.

In the end, it didn't matter whether they were soft or not. Just as I jumped the enraged citizen made a grab for me, and my jump turned into an evasive move that sent me off course. Flailing I hit the barge, but the wrong side, the outside, and smashed into the hull with a force that drove the breath out of me.

Dimly I realized that the cracking sound I'd heard was my ribs breaking as I slapped into the inky-black River Seine.

v.

I made it back of course. Once I'd got to the bank, heaved myself out of the river and used the confusion of the king's journey to Paris to 'liberate' a horse, I took the debris-littered road in the opposite direction to the crowds, out of Paris and to Versailles, and as I rode I tried to keep as still as possible, mindful of my broken ribs.

My clothes were soaked and my teeth were chattering by the time I got back and slid out of the saddle and on to the doorstep of the groundsman's lodge, but whatever poor shape I was in, all I could think was that I'd let him down. I'd let my father down.

Extract from the Journal of Arno Dorian

12 September 1794

Reading, I find myself catching my breath, not just in admiration for her audacity and courage, but because when I follow her journey I realize that I am seeing a mirror image of my own. Mr Weatherall was right (and thank you, thank you, Mr Weatherall, for helping her to see that) because we were so much the same, Élise and I.

The difference being, of course, that she got there first. It was Élise who first trained in the ways of her … Ah, I was going to write her ‘chosen’ Order, but of course there was nothing ‘chosen’ about it, not for Élise. She was born to be a Templar. Groomed for leadership, and if at first she had embraced her destiny, as she surely did, because it gave her a way to escape the life of gossip and fan-wafting she saw at Versailles, then she had come to distrust it as well; she had grown to question the eternal conflict of Assassin and Templar; she had come to ask herself if it was all worth it – if all this killing had achieved anything, or ever would.

As she knew, the man she’d seen me with was Bellec, and I suppose you’d have to say that I fell in with him, that he’d turned my head and made me aware of certain gifts that were within my grasp. In other words, it was Bellec who made me an Assassin. It was he who had mentored me through my induction into the Assassins; he who set me on a course of hunting down my surrogate father’s killer.

Ah yes, Élise. You were not the only one who mourned François de la Serre. You were not the only one who investigated his death. And in that enterprise I had certain advantages: the knowledge of my Order, the ‘gifts’ I had been able to develop under Bellec’s tuition, and the fact that I had been there the night François de la Serre was stabbed.

Perhaps I should have waited and allowed you the honour. Perhaps I was as impulsive as you are. Perhaps.

Extracts from the Journal of Élise de la Serre

25 April 1790

i.

It is six months since I last wrote in my journal. Six months since I took a dive off the Pont Marie on a freezing October night.

For a while of, course, I was bedbound, suffering a fever that came on a few days after my dunk in the Seine and trying to mend a broken rib at the same time. My poor weakened body was having difficulty doing both those things simultaneously, and for a while, according to Hélène anyway, it was touch and go.

I had to take her word for it. I'd been absent in mind if not in body, feverish and hallucinating, gabbling strange things in the night, crying out, my emaciated body drenched in freezing sweat.

My memory of that time was waking up one morning and seeing their concerned faces above my bed: Hélène, Jacques and Mr Weatherall, with Hélène saying, 'The fever's broken,' and a look of relief that passed across them like a wave.

ii.

It was some days later when Mr Weatherall came to my bedchamber and perched himself on the end of my bed. We tended not to stand on ceremony at the lodge. It was one of the reasons I liked it. It made the fact that I *had* to be there, hiding from my enemies, that bit more bearable.

For some time he just sat, and we were silent, the way old friends can be, when silence is not to be feared. From outside drifted the sounds of Hélène and Jacques teasing one another, footsteps scampering past the window, Hélène laughing and breathless, and we caught each other's eye and shared a knowing smile before Mr Weatherall's chin dropped back to his chest and he continued picking at his beard, something he had a habit of doing these days.

And then after a while I said, 'What would my father have done, Mr Weatherall?'

Unexpectedly, he chuckled. ‘He would have called for help from overseas, child. From England, probably. Tell me, what is the state of your relationship with the English Templars?’

I shot him a withering look. ‘What else?’

‘Well, he would have tried to rally support. And before you say anything, yes, what else do you think I’ve been doing while you’ve been in here screaming the place up and sweating for France? I’ve been trying to rally support.’

‘And?’

He sighed. ‘Not much to report. My network is slowly falling silent.’

I hugged my knees and felt a twinge of pain from my ribs, still not fully healed. ‘What do you mean, “slowly falling silent”?’

‘I mean that after months of sending letters and receiving evasive replies, no one wants to know, do they? Nobody will speak to me – *to us* – not even in secret. They say there’s a new Grand Master now, that the La Serre era has come to an end. My correspondents no longer sign their letters. They implore me to burn them once I’ve read them. Whoever this new leader is, he’s got them scared.’

‘ “The La Serre era has come to an end.” That’s what they say?’

‘That’s what they say, child. Yes, that’s about the size of it.’

I gave a short, dry laugh. ‘You know, Mr Weatherall, I don’t know whether to be offended or grateful when people underestimate me. The La Serre era has not *come to an end*. Tell them that. Tell them that the La Serre era will never come to an end while I still have breath in my lungs. These conspirators think they’re going to get away with it – with killing my father and deposing my family from the Order. *Really?* Then they deserve to die just for their stupidity.’

He bristled. ‘You know what that is? That’s revenge talk.’

I shrugged. ‘You call it revenge. I call it fighting back. Either way it’s not sitting here – as you would say, “on my arse” – hiding out in the grounds of a girls’ school, creeping around and hoping that someone will write to our secret letter box. I intend to fight back, Mr Weatherall. Tell that to your contacts.’

But Mr Weatherall could be persuasive. Plus my skills were rusty, my strength depleted – my ribs still hurt for one thing – so I stayed on at the lodge while he went about his business, writing his letters and trying to rally support for my cause beneath the cloak of subterfuge.

News has reached me that the last of the staff have left the chateau in Versailles and I yearn to go there, but of course I cannot, because it isn’t safe, and so I must leave my beloved family home at the mercy of looters.

But I promised Mr Weatherall I would be patient so I’m being patient. For now.

16 November 1790

Seven months of letter writing and we know this much: my allies and friends are now *former* allies and friends.

The purge is complete. Some turned, some were bribed and the others – the ones who were more resilient and tried to pledge their support, men like Monsieur Le Fanu – well, they were dealt with in other ways. One morning Le Fanu had his throat cut, was carried feet first and naked from a Parisian whorehouse, then left in the street to be gawped at by passers-by. For that dishonour he was posthumously stripped of his Order status, and his wife and children, who under normal circumstances would have benefitted from financial help, were left in penury.

Now, Le Fanu was a family man, as devoted to his wife, Claire, as a man ever was. Not only would he never have visited a whorehouse, but I doubt he would have known what to do when he got there. Never did a man less deserve his fate than he.

And that was what his loyalty to the name of La Serre had cost him. It had cost him everything: his life, his reputation and honour, everything.

I knew that any member of the Order who hadn't come into line was going to do so after that, when they knew the potential ignominy of their end. And sure enough, they had.

'I want the wife and children of Monsieur Le Fanu taken care of,' I'd said to Mr Weatherall.

'Madame Le Fanu took her own life and those of the children,' Mr Weatherall told me. 'She couldn't live with the disgrace.'

I closed my eyes, breathing in and out, trying to control a rage that threatened to boil over. More lives to add to the list.

'Who is he, Mr Weatherall?' I asked. 'Who is this man doing all this?'

'We'll find out,' he sighed. 'Don't you worry about that.'

But nothing was done. No doubt my enemies thought that their takeover was complete, that I was no longer dangerous. They were wrong about that.

12 January 1791

My sword skills are back and sharper than ever before, my marksmanship at its most accurate, and I warned Mr Weatherall that it would be soon – that I would be leaving soon – because I was achieving nothing here, that each day I spent in hiding was a day of the fight-back wasted, and he reacted by trying to persuade me to stay. There was always a reply he was waiting for. One more avenue to explore.

And when that didn't work he threatened me. Just I try leaving and I'd know what it felt like to be resoundingly thrashed with the sweaty-armpit end of a crutch. Just I try it.

I remain (im)patient.

26 March 1791

i.

This morning Mr Weatherall and Jacques arrived home from the drop at Châteaufort hours after they were due – so late that I'd begun to worry.

For a while we'd been talking about moving the drop. Sooner or later someone would come. According to Mr Weatherall anyway. The issue of whether to move it had become another weapon in the war the two of us constantly waged, the push and pull of should I stay (him: yes) or should I go (me: yes). I was strong now. I was back to full fitness, and in private moments I'd seethe with the frustration of inaction; I'd picture my faceless enemies gloating with victory and raising ironic toasts in my name.

'This is the old Élise,' Mr Weatherall had warned, 'by which I mean the young Élise. The one who comes sailing over to London and ignites a feud we're yet to live down.'

He was right, of course; I wanted to be an older, cooler Élise, a worthy leader. My father never rushed into anything.

But, on the other hand, my thoughts would return to the question of *doing something*. After all, where a wiser head might have waited to finish her education like a proper little poppet, the young Élise had sprung into action, taken a carriage to Calais and her life had begun. The fact was that sitting here doing nothing made me feel agitated and angry. It made me feel even *more* angry. And I was already a lot angry.

In the end my hand has been forced by what happened this morning, when Mr Weatherall aroused my anxiety by arriving home late from his visit to the drop. I dashed out to the yard to greet him as Jacques drew the cart round.

'What happened to you?' I asked, helping him down.

'Tell you something,' he said, frowning, 'it's bloody lucky that young lad hates the stink of cheese.' He said it with an incline of the head towards Jacques.

'Whatever do you mean?'

'Because it was while he was waiting for me outside the *fromagerie* that something odd happened. Or should I say he saw something very odd. A young

boy hanging around.'

We were halfway back to the lodge, where I planned to make Mr Weatherall a coffee and let him tell me all about it, but now I stopped.

'I beg your pardon?'

'I'm telling you, a little rapscallion, just hanging around.'

This rapscallion, it turned out, had indeed been hanging around. Fancy that, I'd said, a young rapscallion hanging around a town square, but Mr Weatherall had admonished me with a peevish growl.

'Not just *any* rapscallion, but an especially nosy one. He approached young Jacques when Jacques was waiting outside. This boy's asking him questions, questions like, had he seen a man on crutches enter the *fromagerie* that morning? Jacques is a good lad and he told the lad he hadn't seen a man on crutches at all that day but that he'd keep an eye out for him.

' "Great," says the rascal, "I'll be around, won't be far. Might even be a little coin in it for you if you tell me something useful." This little squirt's no older than ten, Jacques reckons. Where do you suppose he's getting the kind of money he needs to pay an informant?'

I shrugged.

'From whoever is paying him, that's who! The kid's working for the same Templars who plotted against us, or my name's not Freddie Weatherall. They want to find the drop, Élise. They're looking for you, and if they think they've located the drop they'll be monitoring it from now on.'

'Did you speak to the boy?'

'Absolutely not. What do you think I am, some kind of bloody idiot? Soon as Jacques came into the shop and told me what happened we left by the back entrance and took the long route home, making sure we weren't followed.'

'And were you?'

He shook his head. 'But it's only a matter of time.'

'How do you know?' I argued. 'There are so many "ifs". *If* the rapscallion was working for the Templars and not just looking to rob you or beg for money or just kick one of your crutches away for the fun of it; *if* he's seen enough activity to alert their suspicions; *if* they decide the drop is ours.

'I think they have,' he said quietly.

'How can you know?'

'Because of this.' He frowned, reached into his jacket and passed me the letter.

ii.

Mademoiselle Grand Master,

I remain loyal to you and your father. We must meet in order that I can tell you the truth about the matter of your father's death and events since. Write to me at once.
Lafrenière

My heart thudded. 'I must respond,' I said quickly.

He shook his head in exasperation. 'You'll do no such bloody thing,' he snapped. 'It's a trap. It's a way of drawing us out. They'll be waiting for us to reply to this. If this is a letter from Lafrenière, then I'm a monkey's uncle. It's a trap. And if we reply we'll be walking right into it.'

'If we reply from here, yes.'

He shook his head. 'You ain't leaving.'

'I have to know,' I said, waving the letter.

He scratched his head, trying to think. 'You're not going anywhere by yourself.'

I gave a short laugh. 'Well, who else can accompany me? You?'

And then I stopped myself as his head dropped.

'Oh God,' I said quietly. 'Oh God, I'm so sorry, Mr Weatherall. I didn't mean …'

He was shaking his head sadly. 'No, no, you're right, Élise, you're right. I'm a protector who can't protect.'

I came to him, knelt by his chair and put my arms round him.

There was a long pause and silence in the front room of the lodge save for Mr Weatherall's occasional snuffles.

'I don't want you to go,' he said at last.

'I have to,' I replied.

'You can't fight them, Élise,' he said, pushing tears from his eyes with angry palms. 'They're too strong now, too powerful. You can't go up against them alone.'

I held him. 'I can't keep running either. You know as well as I do that if they've found our drop then they'll reason we're in the vicinity. They'll draw a circle on a map with the drop at its centre and begin to search. And the Maison Royale, where Élise de la Serre finished her education, is as good a place as any to start the search.

'You know as well as I do that we'll have to leave here, you and I. We have to go somewhere else where we'll make fruitless attempts to rally support and wait for our drop to be discovered before we have to move again. Leaving is not a choice.'

He shook his head. 'No, Élise. I can think of something. So just you listen here. I'm your advisor, and I advise you to stay here while we formulate a

response to this latest unwelcome development. How does that sound? Does that sound enough like an advisor to advise the idea right out of your head?'

I hated the taste of the lie on my lips when I promised to stay. I wonder if he knew that while the household slept I would creep away.

Indeed, as soon as the ink is dry on this entry, I'll put the journal into my satchel and creep out. It will break his heart. For that I'm so sorry, Mr Weatherall.

27 March 1791

i.

As I crossed silently to the front door on my way out of the lodge, a ghost flitted across the hallway.

I cleared my throat and the ghost stopped, turned and put a hand to her mouth. It was Hélène, caught in the act of returning from Jacques' room to her own.

'I'm sorry I startled you,' I whispered.

'Oh, mademoiselle.'

'Is all that creeping around really necessary?'

She coloured. 'I couldn't have Mr Weatherall knowing.'

I opened my mouth to argue but stopped and turned to the door instead. 'Well, goodbye for a while.'

'Where are you going, mademoiselle?'

'Paris. There's something I have to do.'

'And you were leaving in the middle of the night, without saying goodbye?'

'I have to, it's … Mr Weatherall. He doesn't want …'

She scampered across the boards on her tiptoes, came to me and drew my face to hers, kissing me hard on both cheeks. 'Please be careful, Élise. Please come back to us.'

It's funny. I embark on a journey supposedly to avenge my family, but really the lodge is my family. For a second I considered staying. Wasn't it better to live in exile with those I loved than die in pursuit of revenge?

But no. There was a ball of hate in my gut and I needed to get rid of it.

'I will,' I told her. 'Thank you, Hélène. You know … You know I think so much of you.'

She smiled. 'I do.' And I turned and left.

ii.

What I felt as I rode away from the lodge wasn't happiness exactly. It was the exhilaration of action and sense of purpose as I spurred Scratch on to

Châteaufort.

First, I had a job to do, and, arriving in the early hours, I found board and a tavern that was still open, and in there I told anyone who was curious enough to ask that my name was Élise de la Serre, and that I had been living in Versailles but was now bound for Paris.

The next morning I left, and came to Paris, crossing the Pont Marie to the Île Saint-Louis and going … home? Sort of. My villa, at least.

What would it look like? I couldn't even recall whether I'd been a diligent caretaker the last time I was there. Arriving, I had my answer. No, I hadn't been a diligent caretaker, just a thirsty one, judging by the many wine bottles lying about the place. I suppressed a shiver, thinking of the dark hours I had spent in this house.

I left the remnants of the past as they were. Next I wrote to Monsieur Lafrenière, a letter in which I asked him to meet me at L'Hôtel Voysin in two days' time. When I'd hand delivered it to the address he'd given me, I returned to the villa, where I set tripwires, just in case they came to look for me here, and settled in the housekeeper's study to wait.

29 March 1791

i.

I made my way to L'Hôtel Voysin in Le Marais, where I had asked to meet Lafrenière. Who would turn up? That was the question. Lafrenière the friend? Lafrenière the traitor? Or somebody else altogether? And if this was a trap, had I walked into it? Or had I done the only possible thing I could do if I wanted to avoid a lifetime of hiding from men who wanted me dead?

The courtyard of L'Hôtel Voysin was dusky grey. The building rose up on every side, and had once been grand, in looks as aristocratic as those who frequented it, but just as the aristocrats had been laid low by the revolution – and each day were stripped of further entitlements by the Assembly – so Voysin, too, seemed cowed by the events of the last two years: the windows in which lights would have burned were blacked out, some broken and boarded up. The grounds, which once would have been clipped and tended by cap-doffing gardeners, had been deserted and left to go to ruin, so that ivy climbed the walls unchecked, tendrils of it feeling their way towards the blank first-floor windows. Meanwhile, weeds grew between the cobbles and flagstones of the courtyard, which as I entered echoed to the sound of my boots on the stone.

I fought a sense of disquiet, seeing all those darkened windows looking down on this once-bustling courtyard. Any one of them could have provided a hiding place for an assailant.

'Hello?' I called. 'Hello, Monsieur Lafrenière?'

I held my breath, thinking, *This isn't right. This isn't right at all*. Thinking that I was an idiot to arrange to meet here, and that wondering if it might be a trap was hardly the same as being prepared to meet one.

Mr Weatherall was right. Of course he was, and I'd known it all along myself.

It *was* a trap.

From behind me I heard a sound and turned to see a man emerge from the shadows.

I squinted, flexing my fingers, ready.

'Who are you?' I called.

He darted forward, and I realized it wasn't Lafrenière at the same time as I saw moonlight flash along a blade he brought from his waist.

And maybe I would have cleared my sheath in time. After all, I was fast.

And maybe I wouldn't have cleared my sheath in time. After all, he was fast too.

Either way, it didn't matter. The question was decided by the blade of a third party, a figure who seemingly came from nowhere. I saw what I knew was a hidden blade cut across the darkness and my would-be killer fell, and standing behind him was Arno.

For a second, I could only stand and gawp, because this wasn't Arno as I'd ever seen him before. Not only was he wearing Assassin's robes and a hidden blade, but the boy was gone. In his place, a man.

It took me a moment to recover, and then, just as it struck me that they would never send a lone killer for me, that there would be others, I saw a man looming behind Arno, and all those months of target practice at the lodge counted as I snapped off a shot over his shoulder, gave the killer a third eye and sent him crashing dead to the stone of the courtyard.

ii.

Reloading I said, 'What's going on? Where is Monsieur Lafrenière?'

'He's dead,' said Arno.

He said it in a tone of voice I didn't quite care for, as though there was a lot more to that story than he was letting on, and I looked sharply at him. '*What?*'

But before Arno could answer there was the sound of a ricochet and a musket ball slapped into a wall nearby, showering us in stone chips. There were snipers in the windows above us.

Arno reached for me, and the part of me that still hated him wanted to wrench myself away, tell him I could manage by myself, thanks, but the words of Mr Weatherall flashed through my head, the knowledge that whatever else Arno was here for me, which after all was all that really mattered. And I let him take me.

'I'll explain later,' he was saying. 'Go!'

And as another volley of musket fire rained down upon us from the windows above, we made a dash for the courtyard gates and ran out into the grounds.

Ahead of us was the maze, overgrown and untended, but still very much a maze. Arno's robes spread as he ran and his hood dropped back, and I gazed upon his handsome features, happily transported back to happier times, before the secrets had threatened to overwhelm us.

‘Do you remember that summer at Versailles when we were ten?’ I called as we ran.

‘I remember getting lost in that damn hedge maze for six hours while you ate my share of the dessert,’ he replied.

‘Then you’d better keep up this time,’ I called and ran ahead, and despite everything I couldn’t help but hear the note of joy in my voice. Only Arno could do this to me. Only Arno could bring this light into my life. And I think if ever there was a moment when I truly ‘forgave’ him – in my heart and in my head – then that was it.

iii.

By now we had reached the middle of the maze. Our prize was another killer waiting for us. He readied himself, looking nervously from one to the other, and I felt happy for him that he would go to the grave thinking that I had joined with the Assassins. He could meet his maker floating on a cloud of righteousness. In my tale, he was the bad man. In his, he was the hero.

I stepped back and let Arno face the duel, taking the opportunity to admire his swordsmanship. All those years I was learning my own skills his greatest discipline was our governor’s algebra tests; of the two of us, I was by far the more experienced swordsman.

But he had caught up; he’d caught up fast.

He saw my impressed look and flicked me a smile that would have melted my heart if it needed melting.

We made our way out of the maze and on to a boulevard, which teemed with nightlife. One thing I’d noticed about the immediate aftermath of the revolution was that people celebrated more than ever; they lived each day like it was their last.

So it was that the street was alive with actors, tumblers, jugglers and puppeteers, and the thoroughfare thick with sightseers, some already drunk, some well on their way. Most of them with broad smiles plastered across happy faces. I saw plenty of beards and moustaches glistening with ale and wine – men wore them now to show their support for the revolution – as well as the distinctive red ‘liberty caps’.

Which was why the three men coming towards us stuck out like a sore thumb. By my side Arno felt me tense, about to reach for my sword, but stayed my hand with a gentle grip on my forearm. Anybody else would have lost a finger or two for doing that. Arno, I was prepared to forgive.

‘Meet me tomorrow for coffee. I’ll explain everything then.’

1 April 1791

The place des Vosges, the city's oldest, grandest square, was not far from where I had left Arno, and after a night at home I returned the next day a mass of nerves, curiosity and barely contained excitement, brimming with the sense that, despite the Lafrenière setback, I was getting somewhere. I was moving forward.

I came into the square beneath one of the huge vaulted arcades that formed part of the red-brick buildings round its perimeter. Something brought me up short and I stood puzzled for a moment, wondering what was different. After all, the buildings were the same, the ornate pillar still here. But something was missing.

And then it hit me. The statue in the middle of the square – the equestrian bronze of Louis XIII. It wasn't there any more. I'd heard that the revolutionaries were melting down the statues. Here was the proof.

Arno was there in his robes. In the cold light of day I studied him again, trying to work out where it was that the boy had matured into the man: a firmer, more determined set of the jaw, perhaps? His shoulders were more square, his chin held high, his granite eyes at once fierce and beautiful. Arno had always been a handsome boy. The women of Versailles would remark upon it. The younger girls would blush and giggle into their gloves whenever he passed, the simple fact of his good looks overcoming any misgivings they might normally have had about his social standing as our ward. I used to love the warm, superior feeling of knowing, 'He's mine.'

But now – now there was something almost heroic about him. I felt a twinge of guilt, wondering if by obscuring the true nature of his parentage we'd somehow prevented him from reaching his potential before now.

It was joined by another twinge of guilt, this one for Father. If I'd been less selfish and brought Arno over to the fold as I'd once pledged to do, then perhaps this newly minted *man* might now be working in service of our cause rather than for the opposition.

But then, as we sat with coffee and with some semblance of normal Parisian life carrying on around us, it didn't seem to matter much that I was a Templar and he was an Assassin. If not for the robes of his creed we might have been two

lovers enjoying our morning drink together, and when he smiled it was the smile of the old Arno, the boy I'd grown up and fallen in love with, and for some moments it was tempting to forget it all and bask in that warm bath of nostalgia, to let conflict and duty slip away.

'So …' I said at last.

'So.'

'It seems you've been busy.'

'Tracking down the man who killed your father, yes,' he said, averting his eyes, so that again I wondered if there was something he wasn't letting on.

'Best of luck,' I told him. 'He's killed most of my allies and intimidated the rest into silence. He may as well be a phantom.'

'I've seen him.'

'What? When?'

'Last night. Just before I found you.' He stood. 'Come. I'll explain.'

As we walked I pressed him for more information and Arno related the events of the previous evening. In fact, what he'd seen was a mysterious cloaked figure. There was no name to go with this apparition. Even so, Arno's ability to learn so much was almost uncanny.

'How the devil did you do it?' I asked.

'I have unique avenues of investigation open to me,' he said mysteriously.

I cast him a sideways look and remembered what my father had said about Arno's supposed 'gifts'. I'd assumed he meant 'skills', but maybe not. Maybe something else – something so unique that the Assassins had managed to sniff it out.

'All right, keep your secrets then. Just tell me where to find him.'

'I'm not sure that's a good idea,' he protested.

'You don't trust me?'

'You said it yourself. He hunted down your allies and took over your Order. He wants you dead, Élise.'

I chortled. 'And what? You want to protect me? Is that it?'

'I want to help you.' He was serious now. 'The Brotherhood has resources, manpower –'

'Pity is not a virtue, Arno,' I said sharply. 'And I don't trust the Assassins.'

'Do you trust *me*?' he asked searchingly.

I turned away, not really knowing the answer – no, knowing that I *wanted* to trust Arno, and, in fact, was desperate to do so, but knowing he was an Assassin now.

'I haven't changed that much, Élise,' he implored. 'I'm the same boy who distracted the cook while you stole the jam … The same one who helped you

over the wall into that dog-infested orchard …'

There was something else, too. Another thing to consider. As Mr Weatherall had pointed out, I was virtually alone: me against them. But what if I had the backing of the Assassins? I didn't have to ask what my father would have done. I already knew he'd been prepared to make a truce with the Assassins.

I nodded and said, 'Take me to your Brotherhood. I'll hear their offer.'

He looked awkward. '*Offer* may be a bit strong …'

2 April 1791

i.

The Assassin Council turned out to be held in a salon on the Île de la Cité in the shadow of Notre Dame.

‘You sure this is a good idea?’ I said to Arno as we entered a room surrounded by vaulted stone arches. In one corner was a large wooden door with a steel ring handle, standing by it a large bearded Assassin whose eyes gleamed within the dark depths of his cowl. Without a word he nodded to Arno who nodded back, and I had to fight a wave of unreality at seeing Arno this way: Arno the man, Arno the Assassin.

‘We have a common enemy,’ said Arno, as the door was opened and we passed through into a corridor lit by burning torches. ‘The Council will understand that. Besides, Mirabeau was a friend of your father’s, wasn’t he?’

I nodded. ‘Not friends exactly but my father trusted him. Lead on.’

First, though, Arno produced a blindfold from his pocket, insisting I wore it. Just to spite him I counted the steps and the turns, confident I could make my way out of the labyrinth if needs be.

When the journey was over I took stock of my new surroundings, sensing I was in a dank underground chamber, similar to the one above, except this one was populated. From around me I heard voices. At first they were difficult to pinpoint and I thought they were coming from galleries above before I realized that the gathered Council members were arranged around the walls, their voices rising as though seeping into the stone as they shuffled suspiciously and muttered to themselves.

‘Is that …?’

‘What’s he doing?’

I sensed a figure in front of us, who spoke with a rough and rasping French Mr Weatherall sort of voice.

‘What the hell have you done this time, pisspot?’ he said.

My heart hammered, my breathing heavy. What if this infraction was too much? A step too far? What would I hear? More cries of ‘Kill the red-headed

bint'? It wouldn't be the first time, and though Arno had allowed me to keep my pistol and sword, what good would they be if I were blindfolded and facing multiple opponents? Multiple *Assassin* opponents?

But no. Arno had saved me from one trap. He would never deliver me into another. I trusted him. I trusted him as much as I loved him. And when he spoke to address the man who blocked our way, his voice was reassuringly calm and steady, a balm to soothe my nerves.

'The Templars have marked her for death,' he said.

'So you brought her *here*?' said the commanding voice doubtfully. This was Bellec, surely?

But Arno had no time to answer. There was another new entrant to the Council chamber. Another voice that demanded to know, 'Well, who have we here?'

'My name is –' I began, but the new arrival had interrupted me.

'Oh, for heaven's sake, take that blindfold off. Ridiculous.'

I took it off and faced them, the Assassin Council, who were, just as I'd thought, arranged around the stone walls of this deep and dark inner sanctum, the orange glow of the flames flickering on their robes and their faces unreadable beneath cowls.

My eyes settled on Bellec. Hawk-nosed and suspicious, he stared at me with open contempt, his body language protective of Arno.

The other man I took to be the Grand Master, Honoré Gabriel Riqueti, Comte de Mirabeau. As a president of the Assembly he'd been a hero of the revolution, but these days was a moderate voice compared to others clamouring for more radical change.

I'd heard it said he was mocked for his looks, but though he was a portly, round-faced gentleman with quite spectacularly bad skin, he had kind, trustworthy eyes and I liked him at once.

I threw my shoulders back. 'My name is Élise de la Serre,' I told the room. 'My father was François de la Serre, Grand Master of the Templar Order. I've come to ask for your help.'

Heads were inclined as the Council members began to talk quietly among themselves until the new arrival – Mirabeau, surely – silenced them with a raised finger.

'Continue,' he instructed.

Other Council members protested – 'Must we rehash this debate again?' – but again Mirabeau quietened them.

'We must,' he told them, 'and we will. If you cannot see the advantage in being owed a favour by François de la Serre's daughter, I despair for our future.

Continue, mademoiselle.’

‘Here we go,’ spat the man I presumed to be Bellec.

It was to him I addressed my next comments.

‘You are not men with whom I would normally parlay, monsieur, but my father is dead, as are my allies within the Order. If I must turn to the Assassins for my revenge, so be it.’

Bellec snorted. ‘ “Parlay”, my ass. This is a trick to make us lower our guard. We should kill her now and send her head back as a warning.’

‘Bellec …’ warned Arno.

‘*Enough*,’ shouted Mirabeau. ‘Plainly this discussion is better conducted in private. If you will excuse us, Mademoiselle de la Serre?’

I gave a short bow. ‘Certainly.’

‘Arno, perhaps you should accompany her. I’m sure you have much to talk about.’

ii.

We left, returning across the bridge and walking the busy thoroughfares until we found ourselves back at the place des Vosges.

‘Well,’ I said, as we walked, ‘that went about as well as I expected.’

‘Give it time. Mirabeau will talk them round.’

We walked, and as we did so my thoughts went from Mirabeau, the Grand Master of the Assassins, to the man who had overthrown my own Order.

‘Do you really think we can find him?’ I asked.

‘His luck can’t last forever. François Thomas Germain believed Lafrenière was –’

I stopped him. ‘François Thomas Germain?’

‘Yes,’ said Arno. ‘The silversmith who led me to Lafrenière.’

A wave of cold excitement swept through me.

‘Arno,’ I gasped, ‘François Thomas Germain was my father’s lieutenant.’

‘A Templar?’

‘Former. He was cast out when I was younger, something about heretical notions and Jacques de Molay. I’m not entirely sure. But he should be dead. He died years ago.’

Germain. Jacques de Molay. I put those thoughts aside to return to later, perhaps with the help of Mr Weatherall.

‘This Germain is remarkably active for a corpse,’ Arno was saying.

I nodded. ‘I would very much like to ask him a few questions.’

‘I would too. His workshop’s on rue Saint-Antoine. Not far from here.’

With renewed purpose we hurried through a tree-lined passageway that opened out on to a square, bunting hanging above our heads, canopies from the shops and coffee bars fluttering in a slight summer breeze.

The street still showed some of the scars of the unrest: an overturned cart, a small pile of smashed barrels, a series of scorch marks on the cobbles, and of course there were *tricolores* hanging overhead, some of which bore the marks of battle.

Otherwise, however, it seemed peaceful, just as it once had been, with people passing to and fro, going about their everyday lives, and for a moment it was difficult to picture it being the site of cataclysmic events that were changing our country.

Arno took us along cobbled streets until we reached a gateway leading into a courtyard. Overlooking it was a grand house in which he said were the workshops. In there we would find the silversmith. Germain. The man who had ordered my father's death.

'There were guards here last time I came,' he said, and stopped, a wary look crossing his face.

'There are none now,' I said.

'No. But then again a lot has happened since the last time I was here. Perhaps the guards have been withdrawn.'

'Or perhaps something else.'

All of a sudden we were hushed and cautious. My hand went to my sword and I was glad of the feeling of the pistol tucked into my belt.

'Is anybody home?' he called across the empty courtyard.

There was no response. Though there was the noise of the street from behind us, from the foreboding mansion ahead of us came only silence and the unblinking stare of the windows.

The door opened at his touch. With a look at me we went inside only to find the entrance hall deserted. We made our way upstairs, Arno leading us to the workshop. From the sparse look of the place it had recently been abandoned. Inside were most of the accoutrements of a silversmith's trade – at least as far as I could see – but no sign of the silversmith.

We began to look around, cautiously at first, rifling through papers, pulling aside items on shelves, not really sure what we were looking for, just looking, hoping to find some confirmation of the theory that this apparently innocent silversmith was, in fact, the high-ranking Templar Germain.

Because if he was, then that meant this apparently innocent silversmith was the man who had killed my father, and was doing his level best to destroy every other aspect of my life besides.

My fists clenched at the thought. My heart hardened to think of the pain this man had brought the La Serre family. Never had the thought of revenge felt more real to me than it did at that moment.

There came a noise from the doorway. The tiniest of noises – a mere whisper of fabric – it was nevertheless loud enough to alert our heightened senses. Arno heard it, too, and as one we spun in the direction of the entranceway.

'Don't tell me it's a trap,' he sighed.

'It's a trap,' I replied.

iii.

Arno and I exchanged a glance and drew our swords as four grim-faced men filed through the door, took up position to bar our exit and gazed balefully at us. With their battered hats and scruffy boots, they'd taken care to look like fearsome revolutionaries, unlikely to be challenged in the street, but they had more on their minds than freedom, liberty or …

Well, they had death on their minds. They sectioned off, two each for me and Arno. One of the men facing me fixed me with a look, his eyes sunk deep into a high forehead, a red scarf tied at his throat. With a knife in one hand he drew a sword from behind his back, twirled it in a brief show-off figure-of-eight formation, then held me on point. His companion did the same, offering me the back of his hand raised slightly higher than the flat of his sword. Had they really been revolutionaries, keen to rob or otherwise assault me, then they would have been laughing right now, busy underestimating me in the few brief moments before their swift demise. But they weren't. They were Templar killers. And word had reached their ears that Élise de la Serre was no easy prey; she would give them a battle.

The one who held his sword high moved forward first, swinging it in a tactical zig-zag towards my midriff at the same time as he stepped his weight on to his leading foot.

The steel rang as I parried his blade to the side and danced a little to my left, correctly anticipating that Red-Scarf would time his own attack simultaneously.

He did, and I was able to meet his sword with a downward sweep of my own, keeping both of the men at bay for a moment more, giving them pause for thought and letting them know that what they had been told was right: I was trained and I had been trained by the best. And I was stronger than I had ever been.

From my right I heard the swords of Arno and his two opponents ring out, followed by a scream that wasn't Arno.

Now Flat-Sword made his first mistake, his eyes swivelling to see what fate had befallen his companion, and though it was a momentary lapse of concentration, a half-second that his attention was not focused on me, I made him pay for it.

I had him on point, danced forward beneath his guard and struck upwards, opening his throat with a flick of the wrist.

Red-Scarf was good. He knew his companion's death gave him a chance and he lurched forward, his sword in a flat offensive swing that if he'd made contact would have sent me off-balance at the very least.

But he didn't. He was just a little too hasty, a little too desperate to take advantage of what he thought was an opening and I had expected his attack from that side, had dropped to one knee and brought my own blade to bear, still sparkling with the fresh blood of Flat-Sword and now embedded beneath Red-Scarf's armpit, between two layers of thick leather armour.

At the same time there came a second squeal from my left and I heard a thud as the fourth body hit the floor. The battle was over. Arno and I the only two left standing.

We caught our breath, shoulders heaving as the final gurgles of our would-be killers dwindled to dry death-rasps.

We looked at the corpses, then back at one another, and mutually decided to resume searching the workshop.

iv.

'There's nothing here,' I said after a while.

'He must have known his bluff wouldn't hold up,' said Arno.

'So we've lost again.'

'Maybe not. Let's keep looking.'

He tried a door that wouldn't open and seemed about to leave it before I gave him a grin and kicked it down. What greeted us was another slightly smaller chamber, this one full of symbols I recognized: Templar crosses wrought in silver, beautifully crafted goblets and carafes.

No doubt about it, this was a Templar meeting place. On a raised dais at one end of the room was an ornate, intricately carved chair where the Grand Master would sit. Either side were chairs for his lieutenants.

In the centre of the room was a plinth inset with crosses, and lying on it a set of documents that I went to now, snatching them up, the feel of them familiar to me but also strange, as though they were out of place here in a chamber adjacent to a silversmith's workshop and not in the chateau of the La Serre family.

One of them was a set of orders. I had seen similar orders before, of course, signed by my father, but this one – this one was signed by Germain and sealed with a red wax Templar cross.

'It's him. Germain is Grand Master now. How did this happen?'

Arno shook his head, walking towards the window as he spoke, 'Son of a bitch. We must tell Mirabeau. As soon as –'

He didn't finish his sentence. There was the sound of gunshots from outside and then glass shattering as musket balls zipped through the windows and slapped into the ceiling above us, showering us with plaster chippings. We took cover – Arno by the window, me near the door – just as there came another volley of shots.

'Go,' he shouted to me. 'Get to Mirabeau's estate. I'll deal with this.'

I nodded and left, heading to see the Assassin Grand Master, Mirabeau.

v.

It was getting dark by the time I reached Mirabeau's villa. Upon arrival, the first thing to strike me was the scarcity of staff. The house had a strange, silent feel – one it took me a moment or so to recognize as the same as my own house had felt in the wake of Mother's death.

The second thing to strike me – and of course I now know that the two were connected – was the strange behaviour of Mirabeau's butler. He had worn an odd expression, as though his features hadn't quite settled on his face; that, and the fact that he didn't accompany me to Mirabeau's bedchamber. Remembering my arrival at the Boar's Head Inn on Fleet Street it was hardly the first time someone had mistaken me for a lady of the night, but I didn't think that even the sloppy-faced butler was *that* stupid.

No, there was something amiss. I drew my sword and went silently into the bedchamber. It was in darkness, the curtains drawn. The candles were close to guttering, a fire burned weakly in the grate, on a table was laid out the remnants of what looked like supper, and in the bed was what appeared to be a sleeping Mirabeau.

'Monsieur?' I said.

There was no reply, no response at all from Mirabeau, whose ample chest, which should have been rising and falling, remained still.

I went over.

Of course. He was dead.

'Élise, what is this?' Arno's voice from the door startled me, and I whirled round. He looked exhausted from what had obviously been a swift fight, but

otherwise fine.

A sudden feeling of misplaced guilt welled up within me. ‘I found him like this … I don’t …’

He looked at me for a second longer than necessary. ‘Of course not. But I must report this to the Council. They’ll know –’

‘No,’ I snapped. ‘They don’t trust me as it is. I’ll be their suspect, first and last.’

‘You’re right,’ he said, nodding. ‘You’re right.’

‘What are we going to do?’

‘We find out what happened,’ he said decisively. Then he turned, studying the wood surround of the entranceway just behind him. ‘Doesn’t look like the door was forced,’ he added.

‘So the killer was expected?’

‘A guest, perhaps? Or a servant?’

My mind went to the butler. But if the butler did it, then why was he still here? My guess was that the butler was working in a state of wilful ignorance.

Something caught Arno’s eye, and he picked it up, holding it close to inspect it. At first I took it to be a decorative pin, but he was holding it out, his face serious, as if there was something significant about it.

‘What is that?’ I asked, but I knew what it was, of course. I’d been given one at my initiation.

vi.

He handed it to me. ‘It’s … the weapon that killed your father.’

I studied it, seeing the familiar insignia in the centre of the design, then scrutinizing the pin itself. On it was a tiny gutter so that poison would flow inside the blade then exit from two tiny openings further down. Ingenious. Deadly.

And of Templar design. Anybody finding it – one of Mirabeau’s Assassin compatriots, for example – would have assumed that the Grand Master had been murdered by a Templar.

Perhaps he would even assume that Mirabeau had been murdered by me.

‘That’s a Templar badge of office,’ I confirmed to Arno.

He nodded. ‘You saw no one else when you arrived?’

‘Just the butler. He let me in, but he never came upstairs.’

He was searching the room now, his gaze moving across the bedchamber as though he was systematically studying each area. With a small exclamation he

darted to a cabinet, knelt and reached beneath it, retrieving a wine glass flecked with dried dregs of wine inside.

He sniffed it and recoiled. ‘Poison.’

‘Let me see that,’ I said, and held it to my nose.

Next I turned my attention to Mirabeau’s body, fingertips prising open his eyes to check the pupils, opening his mouth to inspect his tongue, pressing down on the skin.

‘Aconite,’ I said. ‘Hard to detect, unless you know what you’re looking for.’

‘Popular with Templars, is it?’

‘With anyone who wants to get away with murder,’ I told him, ignoring the insinuation. ‘It’s almost impossible to detect, and the scent and the symptoms resemble natural causes. Useful when you need to get rid of someone without monitoring them.’

‘And how would one go about acquiring it?’

‘It grows easily enough in a garden, but for the symptoms to have come on so suddenly, it must have been processed.’

‘Or purchased through an apothecary.’

‘Templar poison, Templar pin … It looks damning.’ He shot me a significant look that earned him a frown in return.

‘Bravo, you figured it out,’ I said witheringly. ‘My cunning plan was to murder the only Assassin who doesn’t want to see me dead, then stand about waiting to be discovered.’

‘Not the only Assassin.’

‘You’re right. I’m sorry. But you know this wasn’t my doing.’

‘I believe you. The rest of the Brotherhood, though …’

‘Then let’s find the real killer before they get wind of this.’

vii.

A curious turn of events. Arno had learnt from an apothecary that the poison had been acquired by a man who wore Assassin’s robes. From there was a line of evidence that Arno followed, and it had led us here, to the Sainte-Chappelle church on the Île de la Cité.

A storm was brewing by the time we reached the great church, in more ways than one. I could see that Arno was shaken by the idea that there might be a traitor within the Assassin ranks.

Better get used to it, I thought ruefully.

‘The trail ends here,’ Arno said thoughtfully.

‘Are you sure?’

He was looking up to where high in the turrets of the great church stood a dark figure. Silhouetted against the skyline, his cloak fluttered in the wind as he gazed down upon us.

'Yes, unfortunately,' he said.

I readied myself to go into battle with him once again, but with a hand on mine Arno stopped me. 'No,' he said, 'I must do this myself.'

I rounded on him. 'Don't be ridiculous, I'm not letting you do this alone.'

'Élise, please. After your father died, the Assassins … They gave me a purpose. Something to believe in. To see that betrayed … I need to make it right myself. I need to know why.'

I could understand. Better than anyone I could understand, and with a kiss I let him go.'

'Come back to me,' I told him.

viii.

I craned my neck to look up to the roof of the church, but saw just stone and the angry sky beyond. The figure had gone. Still I watched, until a few moments later when I saw two figures tussling on a ledge.

My hand went to my mouth. A cry for Arno, which would have been useless anyway, dried in my mouth. In the next instant the two figures were tumbling from the church, hurtling down the front of the building, almost shaded out by the driving rain.

For half a second I thought they were going to hit the ground and die right in front of me but their fall was stopped by an overhang.

From my position below I heard their bodies make impact and their cries of pain. I wondered whether either of them could have survived the fall then got my answer as they gathered themselves slowly and painfully and then continued to fight, tentatively at first but with increasing ferocity, their hidden blades flashing like lightning strikes in the dark.

Now I could hear them shouting at one another, Arno crying, 'For God's sake, Bellec, the new age is upon us. Haven't we grown past this endless conflict?'

Of course, it was Bellec, the Assassins' second-in-command. So – he was the man behind Mirabeau's killing.

'Did everything I teach you bounce off that armour-plated skull?' roared Bellec. 'We are fighting for the freedom of the human soul. Leading the revolution against Templar tyranny.'

'Funny how short the road is from revolution against tyranny to indiscriminate murder, isn't it?' roared Arno back.

‘*Bah*. Stubborn little fuck, aren’t you?’

‘Ask anyone,’ retorted Arno, and he leapt forward, his blade making a figure of eight.

Bellec danced back. ‘Open your eyes!’ he shouted. ‘If the Templars want peace, it’s only so they can get close enough to put the knife to your throat.’

‘You’re wrong,’ countered Arno.

‘You haven’t seen what I have. I’ve seen Templars put entire villages to the sword, just for the chance of killing one Assassin. Tell me, boy, in your vast experience – what have you seen?’

‘I’ve seen the Grand Master of the Templar Order take in a frightened orphan and raise him as his own son.’

‘I had hopes for you,’ screamed Bellec, seething now. ‘I thought you could think for yourself.’

‘I can, Bellec. I just don’t think like you.’

The two of them, still grappling, were framed by a vast stained-glass window way, way above me. Lashed by the rain, lit and coloured from behind, they scuffled for a second, as though teetering on some precipice, as though they might fall one way, off the balcony and down to the slick stone of the church courtyard below, or the other way and into the church itself.

Just a question of which way they were going to fall.

There was a crash, coloured glass splintered, robes flapped and tore on shards of glass, and then they fell once more, this time into the church. I dashed across the courtyard to a locked gate through which I could see inside.

‘Arno,’ I called. He stood and shook his head as though to try to clear it, spraying bits of broken glass on the stone floor of the church. Of Bellec there was no sign.

‘I’m fine,’ he called to me, hearing me rattle the gate as I tested it once more, trying to reach him. ‘Stay there.’

And before I could protest he took off and I strained my ears to hear as he ventured deep into the darkness of the church.

Next came the sound of Bellec’s voice coming from … where, I couldn’t see. But somewhere close.

‘I should have left you to rot in the Bastille.’ His voice was a whisper in the damp stone. ‘Tell me, did you ever really believe in the creed or were you a Templar-loving traitor from the start?’

He was taunting Arno. Taunting him from the shadows.

‘It doesn’t have to be this way, Bellec,’ shouted Arno, looking around, squinting into the dark alcoves and recesses.

The reply came, and once more it was difficult to pinpoint from where. The voice seemed to emanate from the church stone itself.

'You're the one who's making it so. If you just see sense, we could take the Brotherhood to a height we've not seen in two hundred years.'

Arno shook his head, voice dripping with irony, 'Yes, killing everyone who disagrees with you is a brilliant way to start your rise from the ashes.'

I heard a noise ahead of me, and saw Bellec a second before Arno did.

'Look out,' I cried as the older Assassin came lunging from the shadows with his hidden blade extended.

Arno turned, saw him and flipped to the side. He came to his feet ready to meet an attack and for a moment or so the two warriors stood facing each other. They were both bloodied and bruised from the battle, their robes tattered, almost shredded in places, but still full of fight. Each was determined that this should end here and it should end now.

From where he was Bellec could see me at the gate and I felt his eyes on me before his gaze returned to Arno.

'So,' he began, his voice full of derision, ripe with scorn, 'now we see the heart of it. It's not Mirabeau who's poisoned you. It's *her*.'

Bellec had formed a bond with Arno but he had no idea of the bond that already existed between me and his pupil, and it was because of this that I didn't doubt Arno.

'*Bellec …*' warned Arno.

'Mirabeau is dead. *She* is the last piece of this lunacy. You'll thank me for this one day.'

Did he mean to kill me? Or kill Arno? Or kill us both?

I didn't know. All I knew was that the church rang to the sound of steel meeting steel as their hidden blades clashed once more and they danced around one another. What Mr Weatherall had told me all those years ago was true: most sword fights are decided in the first few seconds of engagement. But these two combatants were not 'most sword fighters'. They were trained Assassins. Master and pupil. And the fight continued, steel meeting steel, their robes swinging as they attacked and defended, slashed and parried, ducked and whirled; the fight carrying on until they were round-shouldered with exhaustion and Arno was able to summon hidden reserves of strength and prevail, defeating his foe with a cry of defiance and a final thrust of his hidden blade into his mentor's stomach.

And Bellec at last sank to the stone of the church floor, his hands at his belly. His eyes went to Arno. 'Do it,' he implored, close to death now. 'If you've got an ounce of conviction and aren't just a love-addled milksop, you'll kill me now. Because I won't stop. I *will* kill her. To save the Brotherhood I'd see Paris burn.'

‘I know,’ said Arno and delivered the *coup de grâce*.

ix.

Arno told me later what he had seen. He had seen something in a vision when he’d killed Bellec, he’d said with a sideways look, as though to check I was taking him seriously, and I’d thought about what my father had said of Arno, how he believed Arno had possessed special gifts, something not quite … usual. And here it was in action. A vision in which Arno had seen two men – one in Assassin robes, the other a Templar thug – who were scuffling in the street. The Templar seemed to be triumphant but then a second Assassin entered the fray and killed the Templar.

The first Assassin was Charles Dorian, Arno’s father. The second was Bellec.

Bellec had saved his father’s life. From that incident Bellec had recognized a pocketwatch Arno carried and then, when in the Bastille, realized exactly who Arno was.

There was another thing Arno had seen, a second vision, presumably from another killing. This one showed Mirabeau and Bellec talking at some point in the past, Mirabeau telling Bellec, ‘Élise de la Serre will be Grand Master one day. Having her in our debt would be a great boon.’

Bellec in reply saying, ‘A greater one would be to kill her before she is a real threat.’

‘Your protégé vouches for her,’ Mirabeau had said. ‘Don’t you trust him?’

‘With my life,’ Bellec had replied. ‘It’s the girl I don’t trust. Nothing I can say to convince you?’

‘I’m afraid not.’

And Bellec – reluctantly, Arno had said, seeing that his mentor had taken no pleasure, no sense of Machiavellian satisfaction, in slaying the Grand Master; that in his mind it had been a necessary evil, like it or not – Bellec dropping poison into a glass and handing it to Mirabeau. ‘*Santé*.’

Ironic that they should drink to each other’s health. Later Mirabeau was dead and Bellec was planting the Templar pin and leaving. And not long after that, of course, I had come on to the scene.

We had managed to find the culprit and so prevent me being accused of the crime. Had I done enough to ingratiate myself with them? I didn’t think so.

Extracts from the Journal of Arno Dorian

12 September 1794

i.

I knew what happened next, although it wasn't in her journal.

I leafed forward, but no – instead there were pages missing, torn out at some later date, perhaps in a fit of … what? Regret? Anger? Something else?

The moment I told her the truth – she had torn it from her diary.

I knew it would be difficult, of course, because I knew Élise as well as I knew myself. In many ways, she was my mirror, and I knew how I would have felt had the shoe been on the other foot. You can't blame me for putting it off and putting it off, then waiting until one evening when we had eaten well and there was an almost empty bottle of wine on the table between us.

'I know who killed your father,' I told her.

'You do? How?'

'The visions.'

I gave her a sideways look to check she was taking me seriously. As before she looked bemused, not quite believing, not quite disbelieving.

'And the name you came up with is the King of Beggars?' she said.

I looked at her, realizing that she had been conducting her own investigations. Of course she had. 'So you were being serious when you said you would avenge him,' I said.

'If you ever thought otherwise then you don't know me as well as you think you do.'

I nodded thoughtfully. 'And what did you learn?'

'That the King of Beggars was behind the attempt on my mother in '75, that the King of Beggars was inducted into the Order after the death of my family; all of which makes me think that he was inducted as a way of rewarding him for successfully killing my father.'

'Do you know why?'

'It was a coup, Arno. The man who has declared himself Grand Master arranged for my father's killing because he wanted to take his position. No doubt he used my father's attempts to make a truce with the Assassins as leverage.

Perhaps it was the final piece of the puzzle. Perhaps it tipped the balance in his favour. No doubt the King of Beggars was acting on his orders.'

'Not just the King of Beggars. There was someone else there, too.'

She nodded with an odd, gratified smile. 'That makes me happy, Arno. That it took two of them to kill Father. I expect he fought like a tiger.'

'A man named Sivert.'

She closed her eyes. 'That makes sense,' she said after a while. 'They are all in on it, no doubt, the Crows.'

'The who?' I asked, because of course I had no idea who she meant by that.

'It's a name I call my father's advisors.'

'This Sivert – he was one of your father's advisors?'

'Oh yes.'

'François took his eye out before he died.'

She chuckled. 'Well done, Father.'

'Sivert is dead now.'

A shadow crossed her face. 'I see. I would have hoped to have done the deed myself.'

'The King of Beggars too,' I added, swallowing.

And now she turned to me. 'Arno, what are you saying?'

I reached for her. 'I loved him, Élise, as though as he was my own father,' but she was pulling away, standing and folding her arms across her chest. Her cheeks coloured red.

'*You* killed them?'

'Yes – and I make no apology for it, Élise.'

Again I reached for her and again she stepped nimbly away, unfolding her arms to ward me off at the same time. For a second – just a second – I thought she was going to reach for her sword but if so she thought better of it, she gained a hold on her temper.

'You killed them.'

'I had to,' I said without going into it, although she wasn't interested in why, whirling around as though not quite sure what to do with herself.

'You took *my* revenge from me.'

'They were mere lackeys, Élise. The real culprit is out there.'

Furious, she rounded on me. 'Tell me you made them suffer,' she spat.

'Please, Élise, this isn't you.'

'Arno, I have been orphaned, beaten, deceived and betrayed – and I will have my revenge at whatever cost.'

Her shoulders rose and fell. Her colour was high.

‘Well, no, they didn’t suffer. That is not the Assassin way. We take no pleasure from killing.’

‘Oh? Really? So now you’re an Assassin you feel qualified to lecture me on ethics, do you? Well, make no mistake, Arno, I take no pleasure from killing. I take pleasure from justice.’

‘So that is what I did. I brought these men to justice. I had a chance. I took it.’

That appeared to calm her and she nodded thoughtfully. ‘You leave Germain to me, though,’ she said, not a request, a command.

‘I can’t promise that, Élise. If I get a shot, then …’

She looked at me with a half-smile. ‘Then you’ll have me to answer to.’

ii.

After that, we did not see each other for a while, though we wrote, and when at last I had some information for her, I was able to tempt her away from Île Saint-Louis and we went in search of Madame Levesque, who fell beneath my blade. It was an adventure that continued with an unexpected and unscheduled ride on Messieurs Montgolfiers’ hot-air balloon, though gallantry forbids I should reveal what took place during the flight.

Suffice to say, at the conclusion of our journey Élise and I were closer than ever.

But not close enough for me to notice what was happening to her, that the deaths of her father’s advisors were a mere sideshow for her. That what was concerning, maybe even *consuming*, her was getting to Germain.

Extracts from the Journal of Élise de la Serre

20 January 1793

i.

In the street in Versailles was a cart I recognized. Harnessed to it a horse I knew. I dismounted, tethered Scratch to the cart, loosened his saddle, gave him water and nuzzled my head to his.

I took my time making Scratch comfortable, partly because I love Scratch and he deserves all the attention I give him and more, and partly because I was stalling, wanting to put off the moment I faced the inevitable.

The outside wall showed signs of neglect. I wondered which of our staff had been responsible for it when we all lived here. The gardeners, probably. Without them the walls ran thick with moss and ivy, the tendrils reaching up to the top like veins on the stone.

Set into the wall was an arched gate I knew well yet which seemed unfamiliar. At the mercy of the elements the wood had begun to mottle and pale. Where once the door had looked grand, now it looked merely sad.

I opened the gate and entered the courtyard of my childhood home.

Having witnessed the devastation of the villa in Paris, I suppose I was at least mentally prepared. Yet still I found myself stifling a sob to see flower beds full of spindly weeds, the benches overgrown. On a step by a set of drooping shutters sat Jacques, who brightened on seeing me. He rarely spoke; the most animated I ever saw him was deep in hushed conversation with Hélène, and he didn't need to speak now. Just indicated behind him into the house.

Inside were boards across the windows, the furniture mostly overturned, the same sad story I was seeing so often now, only this time it was even sadder because the house was my childhood home and each smashed pot and splintered chair held a memory. As I stepped through my wrecked home I heard the sound of our old grandfather clock, a noise so familiar and redolent of my childhood that it hit me with all the strength of a slap, and for a second I stood in the empty hallway, where my boots crunched on floors that had once been polished to a high shine, and stifled a sob.

A sob of regret and nostalgia. Maybe even a little guilt.

ii.

I came out on to the terrace and gazed out upon the sweeping lawns, once landscaped, now overgrown and unkempt. About two hundred yards away Mr Weatherall sat on the slope, his crutches splayed on either side.

‘What are you doing? I asked, coming to join him.

He’d started a little as I sat, but regained his composure and gave me a long, appraising look.

‘I was heading for the bottom of the south lawn, where we used to train. Trouble is, when I pictured myself being able to make it there and back, I pictured the lawns looking like they used to, but then I arrived and found them like this, and suddenly it’s not so easy.’

‘Well, this is a nice spot.’

‘Depends on the company,’ he said with a sardonic smile.

There was a pause.

‘Sneaking out like that …’ he said.

‘I’m sorry.’

‘I knew you were going to do it, you know. I haven’t known you since you were knee-high to a grasshopper without learning something about a certain look that comes into your eyes. Well, you’re alive at least. What have you been up to?’

‘I went for a ride in a hot-air balloon with Arno.’

‘Oh yes? And how did that go?’

He saw me blush. ‘It was very nice, thank you.

‘So you and him …’

‘I would say so.

‘Well, that’s something then. Can’t have you being lovelorn. What about –’ he spread his hands – ‘everything else? You learn anything?’

‘Plenty. Many of those who plotted against my father have already answered for their crimes. Plus I now know the identity of the man who ordered his murder.’

‘Pray tell.’

‘The new Grand Master, the architect of the takeover, is François Thomas Germain.’

Mr Weatherall made a hissing noise. ‘Of course.’

‘You said he was cast out of the Order …’

‘He was. Our friend Germain was an adherent of Jacques de Molay, first-ever Grand Master. De Molay died screaming at the stake in 1314, raining curses down on anyone in the near vicinity. Master de Molay is the sort of bloke

nobody can decide on, but that was an argument you had to have in private back then, because showing support for his ideas was heresy.

'And Germain – Germain was a heretic. He was a heretic who had the ear of the Grand Master. To end the dissension he was expelled. Your father had begged Germain to come back into line and his heart was heavy to expel him, but …'

'He was cast out?'

'He was, and the Order was told that any man standing by him would be exiled as well. Long afterwards his death was announced, but by then he was just a bad memory anyway.

'Not so, eh? Germain had been rallying support, controlling things behind the scenes, gradually rewriting the manifesto. And now he's in charge, and the Order scratches its head and wonders how we moved from unswerving support to the king to wanting him dead – the answer is that it happened because there was nobody to oppose it. Checkmate.' Mr Weatherall smiled. 'You've got to give it to the lad.'

'I shall give him my sword in his gut.'

'And how will you do that?'

'Arno has discovered that Germain intends to be present at the execution of the king tomorrow.'

Mr Weatherall looked sharply at me. 'The execution of the king? Then the Assembly has reached its verdict already?'

'Indeed it has. And the verdict is death.'

Mr Weatherall shook his head. The execution of the king. How had we arrived here? As journeys go, I suppose the final leg had begun in the summer of last year when twenty thousand Parisians signed a petition calling for a return of rule by the royal family. Where once there had been talk of revolution, now the talk was of counter-revolution.

Of course the revolution wasn't having that, so on 10 August the Assembly had decided to march on the palace at Tuileries where the king and Marie Antoinette had been staying ever since their undignified exile from Versailles almost three years before.

Six hundred of the king's Swiss Guard lost their lives in the battle, the final stand of the king. Six weeks later the monarchy was abolished.

Meanwhile, there were uprisings against the revolution in Brittany and the Vendée, and on 2 September the Prussians took Verdun, causing panic in Paris when stories began to circulate that the royalist prisoners would be released and take bloody revenge on members of the revolution. I suppose you'd have to say

that the massacres that followed were pre-emptive attacks, but massacres they were, and thousands of prisoners were slaughtered.

And then the king went on trial, and today it was announced that he should die by the guillotine tomorrow.

'If Germain is there then I shall be there, too,' I told Mr Weatherall now.

'Why is that, then?'

'To kill him.'

Mr Weatherall squinted. 'I don't think this is the way, Élise.'

'I know,' I said tenderly, 'but you realize I have no other choice.'

'What's more important to you?' he asked testily. 'Revenge or the Order?'

I shrugged. 'When I achieve the first, the second will fall into place.'

'Will it? You think so, do you?'

'I do.'

'Why? All you'll be doing is killing the current Grand Master. You're as likely to be tried for treachery as welcomed back into the fold. I've sent appeals all over. To Spain, Italy, even America. I've had murmurs of sympathy but not a single pledge of support in return, and do you know why that is? It's because to them the fact that the French Order is running smoothly makes your dismissal of marginal interest.

'Besides, we can be sure that Germain has used his own networks. He'll have assured our brothers overseas that the overthrow was necessary, and that the French Order is in good hands.

'We can also assume that the Carrolls will be poisoning the well wherever their name has any standing. You cannot do this without support, Élise, and the fact is you have no support, yet even knowing that you plan to carry on regardless. Which tells me that this isn't about the Order; it's about revenge. Which tells me I'm sitting next to a suicidal fool.'

'I will have support,' I insisted.

'And where will that come from, Élise, do you think?'

'I had hoped to form an alliance with the Assassins,' I said.

He gave a start then shook his head sadly. 'Making peace with the Assassins is pie-in-the-sky stuff, child. It'll never happen, no matter what your friend Haytham Kenway says in his letters. Mr Carroll was right about that. You might as well ask a mongoose and a snake to take afternoon tea.'

'You can't believe that.'

'I don't just believe it, I know it, child. I love you for thinking otherwise, but you're wrong.'

'My father thought otherwise.'

He sighed. ‘Any truce your father brokered was a temporary one. He knew it, like we all do. There never will be peace.’

21 January 1793

i.

It was cold. Biting cold. And our dragon breath hung in the air in front of us as we stood on the place de la Concorde, which was to be the site of the king's execution.

The square was full. It felt as though the whole of Paris, if not the whole of France, had gathered to watch the king die. As far as the eye could see were people who just a year ago would have sworn fealty to the monarch but who were now readying their handkerchiefs to dip in his blood. They clambered on to carts to get a better view, children teetering on their fathers' shoulders, young women doing the same as they sat astride husbands or lovers.

Around the edges of the square, merchants had set up stalls and were not shy about calling out to advertise them, every one an 'execution special'. In the air was an atmosphere I could only describe as one of celebratory bloodlust. You wondered whether they would have had enough of blood by now, these people, the people of France. Looking around, obviously not.

Meanwhile, the executioner was calling up prisoners to be beheaded. They cried and protested as they were dragged to the scaffold of the guillotine. The crowd called for their blood. They hushed in the moment before it was spilt and they cheered when it came spurting forth into the crisp January day.

ii.

'Are you sure Germain will be here?' I'd said to Arno when we arrived.

'I'm sure,' he'd said, and we went our separate ways. Though the plan had been for us to locate Germain, in the end the treacherous ex-lieutenant had made his presence felt by clambering on to a viewing platform, surrounded by his men.

That was him, I thought, looking at him, the crowd seeming to fall away for a moment or so.

This was François Thomas Germain.

I knew it was him. His greying hair was tied back in a black bow and he wore the robes of the Grand Master. And I wondered what bystanders thought, seeing this robed man take such an exalted viewing position. Did they see an enemy of the revolution? Or a friend?

Or, as their faces turned quickly away, as though not wanting to catch Germain's eye, did they just see a man to fear? Certainly he looked fearsome. He had a cruel downturned mouth and eyes that even from this distance I could see were dark and penetrating. There was something about his stare that was disquieting.

I seethed. These were robes I was used to seeing on my father. They had no place adorning the back of this imposter.

Arno had seen him, too, of course, and managed to get much closer to the platform. I watched as he approached the guards stationed at the foot of the stairs, whose job involved keeping the surge of people away from the platform. He spoke to one of them. There were shouts. My eyes went to Germain who leaned over to see Arno, then indicated to the guards to let him up.

I, meanwhile, came as close to the platform as I dared. Whether Germain would recognize me I had no idea, but there were other familiar faces around. I couldn't afford to be seen.

Arno had reached the platform, joining Germain and standing by his side, the two of them looking out over the crowd towards the guillotine, which rose and fell, rose and fell …

'Hello, Arno,' I heard Germain say, but only just, and I risked raising my face to stare up at the platform, hoping that with a mix of lip-reading and the wind in the right direction I would be able to make out what they were saying.

'Germain,' Arno said.

Germain indicated to him. 'It's fitting you're here to see the rebirth of the Templar Order. After all, you were there for its conception.'

Arno nodded. 'Monsieur de la Serre,' he said simply.

'I tried to make him see,' said Germain, shrugging. 'The order had become corrupt, clutching at power and privilege for its own sake. We forgot De Molay's teachings, and that our purpose is to lead humanity into an age of order and peace.'

On the stage the king had been brought up. And to give him his due he faced his tormentors with his shoulders thrown back and his chin held high, proud to the very last. He began to give a speech he had no doubt rehearsed in whatever rough surrounds he had been kept prior to his journey to the guillotine. But just as it came to delivering the final words, a drum roll started up, drowning them out. Brave, yes. But ineffectual to the last.

Above me Arno and Germain continued to talk, Arno, I could see, trying to make sense of things. ‘But you could set it right, is that it? All by killing the man in charge?’

The ‘man in charge’ – my father. The surge of hatred I had experienced on first seeing Germain intensified and I longed to slide the blade of my sword between his ribs and watch him die on the cold stone, just as my father had done.

‘La Serre’s death was only the first stage,’ Germain had said. ‘This is the culmination. The fall of a Church, the end of a regime … the death of a king.’

‘And what did the king do to you?’ sneered Arno. ‘Cost you your job? Take your wife as a mistress?’

Germain was shaking his head as though disappointed with a pupil. ‘The king is merely a symbol. A symbol can inspire fear, and fear can inspire control – but men inevitably lose their fear of symbols. As you can see.’

Leaning on the barrier he gestured towards the scaffold where the king, denied his final chance to recover some of his regal pride, had been forced down to his knees. His chin fit into the notched block and the skin of his neck was exposed for the waiting guillotine.

Germain said, ‘This was the truth De Molay died for: the Divine Right of Kings is nothing but the reflection of sunlight upon gold. And when Crown and Church are ground to dust, we who control the gold will decide the future.’

There was a ripple of excitement among the crowd, which then fell to a hush. This was it. This was the moment. Looking over, I saw the guillotine blade shimmer then drop with a soft thunk, followed by the sound of the king’s head falling into the basket below the block.

There was a moment of silence in the courtyard, which was followed by a sound I would find difficult to identify at first, until, later, I recognized it for what it was. I recognized it from the Maison Royale. It was the sound a classroom full of pupils makes when they realize they’ve gone too far, when a collective intake of breath says there’s no going back. ‘That’s torn it, there’s going to be trouble now.’

Speaking almost under his breath, Germain said, ‘Jacques de Molay, you are avenged.’ And I knew then I was dealing with an extremist, a fanatic, a madman. A man to whom human life had no cost other than its worth in the promotion of his own ideals, which, as the man in charge of the Templar Order, made him perhaps the most dangerous man in France.

A man who had to be stopped.

On the scaffold, Germain was turning to Arno. ‘And now I must take my leave,’ he was saying. ‘A good day to you.’

He looked at his guards and with an imperious wave of the hand, ordered them after Arno with the simple, chilling words: ‘Kill him.’

He moved off.

I started running, vaulting the steps just as two guards were moving forward on Arno, who swung his upper body to meet them, his sword hand reaching across his front.

His blade never cleared leather; my sword spoke once, twice: two fatal arterial slashes that had the guards pitching forward, eyes rolling up in their sockets even as their foreheads made contact with the boards of the platform.

It was quick; it achieved the objective of killing the two guards. But it was bloody and not at all discreet.

Sure enough, from nearby came a scream. In all the commotion of the execution it wasn’t quite urgent or loud enough to panic the crowd, but it was sufficient to alert more guards who came running, mounting the steps of the platform to where Arno and I stood ready to meet them.

I surged forward, desperate to get to Germain, running the first of our assailants through with my blade, withdrawing and spinning at the same time in order to slash backhand at a second guard. It was the kind of move Mr Weatherall would have hated, an attack born more of the desire for a speedy kill than the need to maintain a defensive stance, the kind that left me vulnerable to a counter. And there was nothing Mr Weatherall despised more than a showy, incautious attack.

But then again, I had Arno on my flank, who dealt with a third guard, and just maybe Mr Weatherall might have forgiven me.

In the space of a few seconds we had three bodies piled at our feet. But more guards were arriving and a few yards away I caught sight of Germain. He had seen the tide of battle turn and was making a run for it – racing towards a carriage on the thoroughfare at the perimeter of the square.

I was cut off from reaching him, but Arno …

‘What are you doing?’ I screamed at him, urging him to go after Germain. I deflected the first of my attackers and saw Germain getting away.

‘I’m not leaving you to die,’ called Arno, and turned his attention to where more guards had appeared on the steps.

But I wasn’t going to die. I had a way out. I glanced up to the thoroughfare, saw the carriage door gaping open and Germain about to climb aboard. Thrashing wildly with my sword I vaulted the barrier, landing badly in the dirt but not quite badly enough to die at the hands of a guard who thought he’d seen his chance to kill me and paid for the assumption with steel in his gut.

From somewhere I heard Arno shout, telling me to stop – '*It's not worth it!*' He'd seen a phalanx of guards who rounded the platform, creating an obstacle between me and …

Germain. Who had reached the carriage, clambered in and slammed the door shut behind him. I saw the coachman shake the reins and the horse's crests were whipped by a wind as their muzzles rose and their hocks tightened, and the carriage set off at a lick.

Damn.

I braced myself, about to take on the guards, when I felt Arno by my side, grabbing my arm. 'No, Élise.'

With a cry of frustration I shook him off. The squad was advancing on us, blades drawn, shoulders dropped and forward. In their eyes was the confidence of strength in numbers. I bared my teeth.

Blast him. *Blast Arno*.

But then he grabbed me by the hand, pulled me into the safety and anonymity of the crowd and began pushing his way through startled onlookers at the periphery and into the heart of the mob, leaving the guards behind us.

It wasn't until we had left the scene of the execution – until there were no more people around – that we stopped.

I rounded on him. 'He's gone, damn it, our one chance …'

'It's not over,' he insisted. Seeing I needed cooling down, he added, 'We'll find another lead …'

I felt my blood rising. 'No, we won't. You think he'll be so careless now, knowing how close at his heels we are? You were given a golden opportunity to end his life, and you refused to take it.'

He shook his head, not seeing it that way at all. 'To save your life,' he insisted.

'It isn't yours to save.'

'What are you saying?'

'I'm willing to die to put Germain down. If you don't have the stomach for revenge … then I don't need your help.'

And I meant it, dear journal. As I sit and write this, and mull over the angry words we exchanged I remain certain that I meant it then and mean it now.

Perhaps his loyalty to my father was not as great as he had professed it to be.

No, I didn't need his help.

10 November 1793

They called it the Terror.

‘Enemies of the revolution’ were being sent to the guillotine in their dozens – for opposing the revolution, for hoarding grain, for helping foreign armies. They called the guillotine ‘the national razor’ and it worked hard, claiming two or three heads a day in the place de Révolution alone. France cowered beneath the threat of its dropping blade.

Meanwhile, in events even closer to my own heart, I heard that Arno had been laid low by his Order.

‘He’s been banished,’ Mr Weatherall read from his correspondence, holding a letter, the last vestiges of his once-proud network having got in touch at last.

‘Who?’ I asked.

‘Arno.’

‘I see.’

He smiled. ‘You pretending not to care, are you?’

‘There’s no pretence about it, Mr Weatherall.’

‘Still not forgiven him, eh?’

‘He once pledged to me that if he had his chance to take a shot, then he would take it. He had his chance and didn’t take it.’

‘He was right,’ Mr Weatherall said one day. He spat it out, as though it was something that had been on his mind.

‘I beg your pardon?’ I said.

Actually, I didn’t ‘say’ it. I ‘snapped’ it. The truth was that Mr Weatherall and I had been irate with one another for weeks, maybe even months. Life had been reduced to this one thing: *lying low*. And it made me howl with frustration. Each day spent worrying about finding Germain before he found us; each day spent waiting for letters to arrive from an ever-changing series of drops. Knowing that we were fighting a losing battle.

And yes, I seethed, knowing that Germain had been so close to feeling my sword. Mr Weatherall seethed, too, but for slightly different reasons. What went left unsaid was that Mr Weatherall believed me to be too rash and hot-headed, that I should have waited and bided my time to plot against Germain, just as

Germain had done in his takeover of our Order. Mr Weatherall said I was thinking with my sword. He tried to tell me that my parents would not have acted with such incautious haste. He used every trick he knew, and now he used Arno.

'Arno was right,' he said. 'You would have been cut down. You might as well have slit your own throat for all the good it would have done you.'

I made an exasperated sound, shooting a resentful look around the room in which we sat. It was warm, homely and I should have loved it here but instead it felt small and crowded. This room and the lodge as a whole had come to symbolize my own inaction.

'What would you have me do, then?' I asked.

'If you truly loved the Order the best thing you can do is offer to make peace. Offer to serve the Order.'

My mouth dropped open.

'Yield?'

'No, not yield, make peace. Negotiate.'

'But they are my enemies. I cannot *negotiate* with my enemies.'

'Try looking at it from another point of view, Élise,' Mr Weatherall pressed, trying to get through to me. 'You're making peace with the Assassins but you don't negotiate with your own people. That's what it looks like.'

'It wasn't the Assassins who killed my father,' I hissed. 'You think I can make a truce with my father's murderers?'

He threw up his hands. 'Christ, and she thinks that Templars and Assassins can just make up. What if they're all like you, eh? "I want revenge, bugger the consequences." '

'It would take time,' I admitted.

He pounced. 'And that's what you can do. You can bide your time. You can do more on the inside than you can on the outside.'

'And they'll know that. They'd have smiling faces and knives behind their backs.'

'They won't murder a peacemaker. The Order would think it dishonourable, and what they need above all is harmony within the Order. No. If you bring diplomacy they'll respond with diplomacy.'

'You can't be sure of that.'

He gave a small shrug. 'No, but either way, I believe risking death that way is better than risking death your way.'

I stood and glared down at him, this old man hunched over his crutches. 'So that's your advice, is it? Make peace with my father's killers.'

He looked up at me with eyes that were sad because we both knew there was only one way this could end.

‘It is,’ he said. ‘As your advisor, that’s my advice.’

‘Then consider yourself dismissed,’ I said.

He nodded. ‘You want me to leave?’

I shook my head. ‘No. I want you to stay.’

It was me who left.

2 April 1794

It was almost too painful to come here again, to the chateau in Versailles, but this was where Arno was staying, so this was where I went.

At first I thought the information I'd been given must have been wrong, because inside, the chateau was in the same, if not worse, condition than it had been when I was last there.

Then again, something else I'd learnt was that Arno had evidently taken his banishment from the Assassins badly, and had gained something of a name for himself as the local drunk.

'You look like hell,' I told him, when eventually I found him ensconced in my father's office.

Regarding me with tired eyes before his gaze slid away, he said, 'You look like you want something from me.'

'That's a fine thing to say after you up and vanished.'

He made a short scoffing sound. 'You made it fairly clear my services were no longer required.'

I felt my anger rise. 'Don't. Don't you dare talk to me like that.'

'What do you want me to say, Élise? I'm sorry I didn't leave you to die? Forgive me for caring more about you than about killing Germain?'

And yes, I suppose my heart did melt. Just a little. 'I thought we wanted the same thing.'

'What I wanted was you. It kills me knowing my carelessness got your father killed. Everything I've been doing has been to fix that mistake and to prevent it happening again.' He dropped his eyes. 'You must have come here with something in mind. What was it?'

'Paris is tearing itself apart,' I told him, 'Germain has driven the revolution to new heights of depravity. The guillotines operate nearly round the clock now.'

'And what do you expect me to do about it?'

'The Arno I love wouldn't have had to ask that question,' I said.

I waved a hand at the mess that had once been my father's beloved office. It was in here that I had learnt of my Templar destiny, in here I had been told of Arno's Assassin lineage. Now it was a hovel. 'You're better than this,' I said.

‘I’m going back to Paris – are you coming?’

His shoulders slumped and for a moment I thought it was the end for Arno and me. With so many secrets poisoning the lake of our relationship, how could we ever be what we were? Ours was a love thwarted by the plans made for us by other people.

But he stood, as though having made the decision, and raised his head, looking at me with bleary, hungover eyes that were nevertheless filled with renewed purpose.

‘Not yet,’ he told me. ‘I can’t leave without taking care of La Touche.’

Ah, Aloys la Touche. The new addition to our – or should I say ‘their’ – Order, one of Germain’s appointments, a man who amputated the limbs of beggars. Arno could kill him for all I cared.

Even so. ‘Is this really necessary?’ I asked him. ‘The longer we wait, the more likely Germain will slip through our fingers.’

‘He’s been grinding Versailles under his boot for months. I should have done something about it a long time ago.’

He had a point.

‘All right. I’ll go see to our transportation. Stay out of trouble.’

He looked at me. I grinned and amended my farewell. ‘Don’t get caught.’

3 April 1794

‘Things have changed a great deal since you left Paris,’ I told him the next day, as we took our places on a cart back to the city.

He nodded. ‘A great deal to be set right.’

‘And we’re no closer to finding Germain.’

‘That’s not entirely true,’ he said. ‘I have a name.’

I looked at him. ‘Who?’

‘Robespierre.’

Maximilien de Robespierre. Now there a name to conjure with. The man they called ‘*l’Incorruptible*’, he was president of the Jacobins and the nearest France currently had to a ruler. Thus, he was a man who wielded enormous power.

‘I think you’d better tell me what you know, don’t you?’

‘I’ve seen everything, Élise,’ he said, his face crumbling as though unable to cope with the recollection.

‘What do you mean, “everything”?’ I asked him carefully.

‘I mean – I see things. You remember when I killed Bellec? I saw things then. It’s how I was able to know what to do next.’

‘Tell me more,’ I said, wanting him to open up, but at the same time not wanting to speak to him.

‘You remember that I killed Sivert?’

I pursed my lips, damping down a little surge of denial.

‘I had a vision then,’ Arno continued. ‘I have had visions for them all, Élise. All of the targets – men and women with whom I have a personal connection. I saw Sivert denied entrance to a Templar meeting by your father, the first seeds of his resentment towards him. I saw Sivert approach the King of Beggars. I saw the pair of them attack your father.’

‘Two of them,’ I spat.

‘Oh, your father fought bravely, and as I told you before, he managed to take out Sivert’s eye; indeed, he would most definitely have prevailed were it not for the intervention of the King of Beggars …’

‘You saw it happen?’

‘In the vision, yes.’

‘Which is how you knew that an initiation pin was used?’

‘Indeed.’

I leaned into him. ‘This thing you do. How do you do it?’

‘Bellec said that some men are born with the ability, others can learn it over time through training.’

‘And you’re one of those born with it.’

‘It would seem so.’

‘What else?’

‘From the King of Beggars I learnt that your father resisted his overtures. I saw Sivert offer him the pin, with talk of how his “master” could help.’

‘His “master”? Germain?’

‘Exactly. Though I didn’t know that then. All I saw was a robed figure accepting the King of Beggars into your Order.’

I thought of Mr Weatherall with a pang of regret that we had parted on such bad terms, wishing I could share with him the fact that our theories had been correct.

‘The King of Beggars was rewarded for killing my father?’ I asked.

‘It would seem so. When I killed Madame Levesque I saw behind the Templars’ plans to raise the price of grain. I also witnessed your father expelling Germain from the Order. Germain invoked De Molay as they dragged him away. I saw Germain later approach Madame Levesque. I saw the Templars plotting to release information that would be damaging to the king.

‘Germain said that when the king was executed like a common criminal he could show the world the truth about Jacques de Molay.

‘I saw something else, too. I saw Germain introduce his Templar confederates to none other than Maximilien de Robespierre.’

8 June 1794

i.

I could barely remember a time when the streets of Paris weren't thronged with people. I had seen so many uprisings and executions, so much blood spilled on the streets. Now, on the champ de Mars, the city had gathered again. But there was a different feeling in the air this time.

Before, Parisians had come ready for battle, certainly prepared to kill, and prepared to die if needs be; before, they had gathered to fill their nostrils with the smell of guillotine blood, whereas now they came to celebrate.

They were arranged in columns, with the men on one side, the women on the other. Many carried flowers, bouquets and branches of oak, and those that didn't held flags aloft, and they filled the champ de Mars, this huge park space, looking towards the man-made mountain at its centre, on which they hoped to see their new leader.

This, then, was the Festival of the Supreme Being, one of Robespierre's ideas. While the other revolutionary factions wanted to dispense with religion altogether, Robespierre understood its power. He knew that the common man was attached to the idea of belief. How they wanted to believe in *something*.

With many republicans supporting what they were now calling 'de-Christianization', Robespierre had had an idea. He had come up with the creation of a new creed. He had put forward the idea of a new non-Christian deity: the Supreme Being. And last month he had announced the birth of a new state religion, with a decree that the 'French people recognize the Supreme Being and the immortality of the soul …'

To convince the people what a great idea it was, he had come up with the festivals. The Festival of the Supreme Being was the first one.

What his *real* motives were, I had no idea. All I knew was that Arno had discovered something. Arno had discovered that Robespierre was Germain's puppet. Whatever was happening here today had less to do with the needs of the general populace and more to do with furthering the aims of my former Templar associates.

‘We’ll never get close to him in the middle of all this,’ observed Arno. ‘We had best retire and wait for a better opportunity.’

‘You’re still thinking like an Assassin,’ I chided him. ‘This time, I have the plan.’

He looked at me with raised eyebrows and I ignored his attempts at humorous disbelief. ‘Oh? And what plan is that?’

‘Think like a Templar.’

There came the sound of artillery in the distance. The babble of the crowd died then rose again as they readied themselves, and solemnly the two columns of people began moving towards the mount.

There were thousands of them. They sang songs and called, ‘Viva Robespierre!’ as they advanced on the mount. Everywhere the *tricolore* was held aloft and fluttered in the gentle breeze.

As we approached I saw more and more of the white breeches and buttoned double-breasted jackets of the National Guard. Every one of them had a sword at his hip; most had muskets and bayonets, too. They formed a barrier between the crowds and the mount from which Robespierre would deliver his address. We drew to a halt before them, waiting for the great speech to begin.

‘All right, what now?’ asked Arno, appearing at my side.

‘Robespierre is unassailable; he’s got half the Guard out in force,’ I said, indicating the men. ‘We’ll never get within yards of him.’

Arno shot me a look. ‘Which is what I said.’

Not far away from where we stood was a large tent, ringed by vigilant-looking National Guard. In there would be Robespierre.

He would no doubt be preparing himself for his great speech, like an actor before a show, ready to appear before the people as regal and presidential. Indeed, there was no doubt in anyone’s mind to whom the Supreme Being referred; I’d heard mumbles of it as we’d made our way inside the main arena. True, there was a celebratory mood in the air, what with the singing, the laughter, the branches and bouquets we all held, but there was no shortage of dissension either, even if it was delivered at a far lower volume.

And that gave me an idea …

‘But he’s not as popular as he was,’ I said to Arno. ‘The purges, this Supreme Being cult … All we have to do is discredit him.’

Arno agreed. ‘And a massive public spectacle is the perfect venue.’

‘Exactly. Paint him as a dangerous lunatic and his power will evaporate like snow in April. All we need is some convincing evidence.’

ii.

From the mount Robespierre gave his speech. ‘The eternally happy day, which the French people have consecrated to the Supreme Being, has finally arrived …’ he began. The crowd lapped up his every word, and as I moved through the crowd I thought, *He’s really doing it*. He really was inventing a new god, and he meant for us all to worship it.

‘He did not create kings to devour the human race,’ Robespierre said. ‘He did not create priests to harness us like brute beasts to the carriages of kings …’

Truly this new god was a god fit for a revolution.

Then he was finished and the crowd were roaring, perhaps even the naysayers were caught up in the communal joy of the occasion. You had to hand it to Robespierre. For a country so divided we were at last calling with one voice.

Arno, meanwhile, had found his way into Robespierre’s tent looking for something we could use to incriminate our supreme leader. He reappeared bearing gifts: a letter that I read, which proved beyond doubt Robespierre’s link to Germain.

> *Monsieur Robespierre,*
>
> *Take care that you do not allow your personal ambitions to come before the Great Work. That which we do, we do not for our own glory, but to remake the world in De Molay’s image.*
> *G*

There was also a list.

‘A list of names – about fifty or so deputies of the National Convention,’ said Arno. ‘All written in Robespierre’s hand and all opposed to him.’

I chuckled. ‘I imagine those good gentlemen would be quite interested to know they’re on that list. But first …’ I indicated some barrels of wine a short distance away. ‘Monsieur Robespierre brought his own refreshments. Distract the guards for me. I have an idea.’

iii.

We performed our tasks well. Arno had ensured that the list grabbed the attention of some of Robespierre’s fiercest critics; I, meanwhile, had drugged his wine.

‘What exactly was in that wine?’ Arno had said as we stood and waited for the show to begin – for Robespierre to make a speech under the influence of what I had slipped in his drink, which was …

‘Powdered ergot. In small doses it causes mania, slurred speech, even hallucinations.’

Arno grinned. ‘Well, this should be interesting.’

Indeed it had been. Robespierre had rambled and slurred his way through his speech, and when his adversaries challenged him about the list, he had no sensible answer.

We left as Robespierre was clambering down from the mount accompanied by the boos and jeers of the crowd, probably confused by how the festival could start so well and end quite so catastrophically.

I wondered if he could sense the presence of hands behind the scenes, manipulating events. If he was Templar, he should be accustomed to it. Either way, the process of discrediting him had well and truly begun. We only needed to wait.

27 July 1794

i.

Reading that last entry back. ‘We only needed to wait.’

Well, pah! A pox on it, as Mr Weatherall would have said. It was the waiting that drove me insane.

Alone, I whirled across the bare floors of the empty villa, sword in hand, practising my swordsmanship, and I found myself looking for Mr Weatherall, who would be sitting watching me with his crutches close to hand, telling me my stance was wrong, my footwork overcomplicated – ‘And will you stop bloody showing off!’ – only he wasn’t there. I was alone. And I should know better, really, because alone was no good for me. Alone I pondered. I had too much time to wallow in my own thoughts and dwell on things.

Alone I festered like an infected wound.

All of which was part of the reason that today I lost sight of myself.

ii.

It began with news that spurred me into action and then a meeting with Arno. Robespierre had been arrested, I told him. ‘Apparently he made vague threats about a purge against “enemies of the state”. He’s scheduled for execution in the morning.’

We needed to see him before that, of course, but at the For-l’Évêque prison we found a scene of carnage. Dead men were everywhere, Robespierre’s escort slaughtered, but there was no sign of Robespierre himself. From a corner came a groan and Arno scrambled to kneel with a guard who half sat up against the wall, his chest sticky with blood. He reached to loosen the soldier’s clothes, find the wound and stop the bleeding. ‘What happened here?’ he asked.

I stepped closer, craning to hear the answer. As Arno struggled to help the soldier live, I stepped over a puddle of his blood to bring my ear closer to his mouth.

‘Warden refused to take the prisoners,’ coughed the dying man. ‘While we were waiting for orders, troops from the Paris Commune ambushed us. They took Robespierre and the other prisoners.’

‘*Where?*’

‘That way,’ he said, pointing. ‘Can’t be going far. Half the city’s turned out against Robespierre.’

‘Thank you.’

And of course I should have helped tend to the man’s wounds. I should not have hastened away to find Robespierre. It was the wrong thing to do. It was bad.

Even so, it was not as bad as what happened next.

iii.

Robespierre had tried to escape, but as with many of his plans lately it was thwarted by Arno and me. We reached him at the Hôtel de Ville, with the Convention troops moments away from bursting through the door.

‘Where’s Germain?’ I had demanded to know.

‘I’ll never talk.’

And I did it. This terrible thing. This thing that is proof I’ve arrived at the edge of what it means to be me, which I can’t stop, because to get here I’ve come too far.

What I did was pull my pistol from my belt and even as Arno was raising his hand to try to stop me, I was pointing my pistol at Robespierre, seeing him through a veil of hatred, and firing.

The shot was like cannon fire in the room. The ball slapped into his lower jaw, which cracked and hung limp at the same time as blood began gushing from his lips and gums, splattering to the floor.

He screamed and writhed, his eyes wide with terror and pain, his hands at his shattered and bleeding mouth.

‘Write,’ I snapped.

He tried to form words but could not, scribbling on a piece of paper, blood pouring from his face.

‘The temple,’ I said, snatching up the paper and reading his words, ignoring the horrified look Arno was giving me. ‘I should have known.’

The boots of the Convention troops were close now.

I looked at Robespierre. ‘I hope you enjoy revolutionary justice, monsieur,’ I said, and we departed, and behind us we left a weeping, wounded Robespierre,

holding his mouth together with hands that were soaked in blood … and a little bit of my humanity.

iv.

These things. It's as though I'm imagining them being done by another person – 'another me' over whom I have no control, whose actions I can only watch with a kind of detached interest.

And I suppose that all of this is evidence, not only that I have failed to heed the warnings of Mr Weatherall and perhaps most egregiously failed to act upon the teachings of my mother and father, but that I have reached some place of mental infection and it is too late to stop it. There is no choice but to cut it away and hope that I survive the amputation a cleansed person.

But if I do not survive …

I must now conclude my journal, at least for tonight. I have some letters to write.

Extracts from the Journal of Arno Dorian

12 September 1794

i.

And I suppose here is where I should take up the story. I should take it up by saying that when I met her at the temple the following day she looked pale and drawn, and I now know why.

Over a hundred years ago the Temple du Marais had been modelled on the Roman Pantheon. Rising behind an arched frontage, with its own version of the famed dome, were high walls. The only traffic in and out was the occasional wagon full of hay passing in through a postern gate.

Straight away Élise wanted to split up, but I wasn't sure; there was something about the look in her eyes, as though there was something missing, as if a part of her were absent somehow.

Which in a way, I suppose, was right. I took it then to be determination and focus and I've read nothing in her journals to suggest it was anything more than just that writ large. Élise may have been resolved to reach Germain but I don't think she believed she would be killed, only that she was going to kill Germain that day or die in the process.

And perhaps she allowed that serenity of the soul to swallow her fear, forgetting that sometimes, however determined you are, however advanced your skills in combat, it's fear that keeps you alive.

As we'd split up to find a way into the temple's inner sanctum, she'd fixed me with a meaningful look. 'If you get a shot at Germain,' she'd said, 'you take it.'

ii.

And I did. I had found him inside the temple, where he was dark within the dank grey stone, a lone figure among the pillars inside the church.

And there I had my shot.

He was too quick for me, though. He produced a sword of uncanny powers. This sword was the kind of thing I would once have laughed off and said must be a trick. These days, of course, I knew better than to scoff at things I didn't

understand, and as Germain wielded the strange, glowing thing it appeared to harness and unleash great bolts of energy as though converting them from the air around him. It appeared to glow and spark. No, there was nothing laughable whatsoever about this sword.

It spoke again, sparking and throwing out a bolt of energy that seemed to leap for me as though it had a mind of its own.

'So, the prodigal Assassin returns,' called Germain. 'I suspected as much when La Touche stopped sending his tax revenues. You've become quite the thorn in my side.'

I dashed from out of my hiding place from behind a column, my hidden blade extended and glowing dully in the half-light.

'I assume Robespierre was your doing as well?' he said as we squared up.

I grinned agreement.

'No matter,' he smiled, 'his Reign of Terror served its purpose. The metal has been fired and shaped. Quenching it will only set its form.'

I darted forward and struck out at his sword, aiming not to deflect it but to damage it, knowing that if I could somehow disarm him I might swing the battle in my favour.

'Why so persistent?' he taunted. 'Is it revenge? Did Bellec indoctrinate you so thoroughly that you do his bidding even now? Or is it love? Has La Serre's daughter turned your head?'

My hidden blade came down hard on the shaft of his sword and the weapon seemed to give out a hurt, angry glow, as though it was wounded.

Even so, Germain, on the back foot now, was somehow able to harness its power again, this time in a way even I had difficulty believing. With a burst of energy that threw me backwards and left a scorch mark on the floor, the Grand Master simply disappeared.

From deep within the recesses of the temple came an answering bang that seemed to ripple around the stone walls, and I pulled myself to my feet to head in that direction, scrambling down a set of damp steps until I reached the crypt.

From my left Élise emerged from the dark of the catacombs. Clever. Just a few moments earlier and we would have had Germain cut off in both directions.

(These moments, I realize now – a few seconds here, a few seconds there. They were tiny, heartbreaking quirks in time that decided Élise's fate.)

'What happened here?' she said, studying what had once been the gate to the crypt but which was now blackened and twisted.

I shook my head. 'Germain's got some kind of weapon … I've never seen its like before. He got away from me.'

She barely glanced my way. ‘He didn’t come past me. He must be down there.’

I shot her a doubtful look. Even so, with our swords ready we took the few remaining steps down to the crypt.

Empty. But there had to be a secret door. I began to feel for one and my fingertips found a lever between the stone, pulled it and stood back as a door slid open with a deep grinding sound and a large vault stretched ahead, lined with pillars and Templar sarcophagi.

Inside stood Germain. He had his back to us, and I had just realized that his sword had somehow recovered its power and that he was waiting for us when from by my side Élise leapt forward with a shout of rage.

‘*Élise!*’

Sure enough, as Élise bore down upon him, Germain swung round, wielding the bright, glowing sword, a snake-like bolt of energy surging from it and forcing us to dive for cover.

He laughed. ‘Ah, and Mademoiselle de la Serre as well. This is quite the reunion.’

‘Stay hidden,’ I whispered to Élise. ‘Keep him talking.’

She nodded and crouched behind a sarcophagus, waving me away and calling to Germain at the same time.

‘Did you think this day would never come?’ she asked. ‘That because François de la Serre had no sons to avenge him your crime would go unanswered?’

‘Revenge, is it?’ he laughed. ‘Your vision is as narrow as your father’s.’

She shouted back. ‘You’re one to talk. How wide of vision was your grab for power?’

‘Power? No, no, no, you’re smarter than that. This was never about power. It’s always been about control. Did your father teach you nothing? The Order has grown complacent. For centuries we’ve focused our attentions on the trappings of power: the titles of nobility, the offices of Church and State. Caught in the very lie we crafted to shepherd the masses.’

‘*I’ll kill you,*’ she called.

‘You’re not listening. Killing me won’t stop anything. When our brother Templars see the old institutions crumble, they will adapt. They will retreat to the shadows and we will, at last, be the Secret Masters we were meant to be. So come – kill me if you can. Unless you can miracle up a new king and halt the revolution in its tracks, it does not matter.’

I sprung my trap, coming up on Germain’s blind side and unlucky not to finish him with my blade; instead his sword crackled angrily and an orb of blue-white energy came shooting out of it with the velocity of a cannonball, inflicting the

damage of a cannonball on the vault around us. In a moment I was engulfed by dust as masonry fell down – and in the next moment caught beneath a fallen pillar.

'*Arno,*' she called.

'I'm stuck.'

Whatever the great ball of energy had been, Germain hadn't been in full command of it. He was picking himself up now, coughing as he squinted through the swirling dust at us, stumbling on the masonry littering the stone floor as he dragged himself to his feet.

Hunched over, he stood and wondered whether to finish us off but evidently decided against it, instead spinning and fleeing further into the depths of the vault, his sword spitting angry sparks.

I watched as Élise's desperate eyes went from me, momentarily out of action and in need of help, to the retreating figure of Germain and then back to me.

'He's getting away,' she said, her eyes blazing with frustration, and when she looked back at me I could see the indecision written all over her face. Two choices. Stay and let Germain escape, or go after him.

There was never any doubt, really, which option she'd choose.

'I can take him,' she said, deciding.

'You can't,' I said. 'Not alone. Wait for me. *Élise*.'

But she had disappeared. With a howl of effort I freed myself from the stone, scrambled to my feet and set off after her.

And if I had only been seconds earlier (as I say – each step of the way towards her death was decided by just a few seconds) I could have tipped the battle, because Germain was defending furiously, the effort written all over those cruel features, and perhaps his sword – this thing I've decided was almost alive – somehow sensed that its owner faced defeat … because with a great explosion of sound, light and a huge, indiscriminate burst of energy it shattered.

The force rocked me on my feet but my first thought was for Élise. Both she and Germain had been at the very centre of the blast.

Through the dust I saw her red hair where she lay crumpled beneath a column. I ran to her, went to my knees and took her head in my hands.

In her eyes was a bright light. Élise saw me, I think, in the second before she died. She saw me and the light came into her eyes one final time – and then winked out.

iii.

I ignored Germain's coughing for a while, and then gently laid Élise's head down on the stone, closed her eyes and stood, walking across the debris-strewn chamber to where he lay, blood bubbling at his mouth, watching me, almost dead.

I knelt. Without taking my eyes off his, I brought my blade to bear and finished the job.

I saw the vision when Germain died.

(And let me pause to imagine the sideways look on Élise's face when I told her about the visions. Not quite belief, not quite doubt.)

This vision was different to the others. I was somehow present within it, in a way that I never had been before.

I found myself in Germain's workshop, watching as Germain, looking like he once had, in the clothes of a silversmith, sat crafting a pin.

As I gazed at him, he clutched at his temples and began to mutter to himself, as though assailed by something in his head.

What was it? I wondered, just as a voice came from behind me, startling me.

'Bravo. You've slain the villain. That is how you've cast this little morality play in your mind, isn't it?

Still in the vision I turned to see the source of the voice, only to find another Germain – this one much older, the Germain I knew – standing behind me.

'Oh, I'm not really here,' he explained, 'and I'm not really there either. At the moment I'm bleeding out on the floor of the Temple. But it seems the father of understanding has seen fit to give us this time to talk.'

All of a sudden the scene shifted and we were in the secret vault beneath the temple where we'd been fighting, only the vault was unscathed and there was no sign of Élise. What I saw were scenes from another, earlier time as the younger Germain approached an altar where De Molay's texts were laid out.

'Ah,' came the voice of the guide-Germain from behind me. 'A particular favourite of mine. I did not understand the visions that haunted my mind, you see. Images of great golden towers, of cities shining white as silver. I thought I was going mad. Then I found this place – Jacques de Molay's vault. Through his writings, I understood.'

'Understood what?'

'That somehow, through the centuries, I was connected to Grand Master de Molay. That I had been chosen to purge the Order of the decadence and corruption that had set in like rot. To wash clean the world, and restore it to the truth the father of understanding intended.'

And once again the scene shifted. This time I found myself in a room, where high-ranking Templars passed judgement on Germain and banished him from the Order.

‘Prophets are seldom appreciated in their own time,’ he explained from behind me. ‘Exile and abasement forced me to re-examine my strategies, to find new avenues for the realization of my purpose.’

Once more the scene shifted and I found myself being assaulted with images of the Terror, the guillotine rising and falling like the inexorable ticking of a clock.

‘No matter the cost?’ I asked.

‘New order never comes without the destruction of the old. And if men are made to fear untrammelled liberty, so much the better. A brief taste of chaos will remind them why they crave obedience.’

And then the scene warped again and once more we were in the vault. This time it was moments before the explosion that had claimed Élise’s life, and I saw in her face the effort of making what had been the battle’s decisive blow, and I hoped that she knew her father had been avenged, and that it had brought her some peace.

‘It appears we part ways here,’ said Germain. ‘Think on this: the march of progress is slow, but it is as inevitable as a glacier. All you have accomplished here is to delay the inevitable. One death cannot stop the tide. Perhaps it will not be my hand that shepherds mankind back into its proper place – but it will be someone’s. Think on this when you remember her.’

I would.

Something puzzled me in the weeks after her death. How was it possible that I had known Élise better than any other person, had spent more time with her than anybody else, and that it had counted for nothing in the end, because I didn’t really know her?

The girl, yes, but not the woman she became. Having watched her grow I never really got the chance to admire the beauty of Élise in bloom.

And now I never will. Gone is the future we had together. My heart aches for her. My chest feels heavy. I weep for love lost, for yesterdays gone, for tomorrows that will never be.

I weep for Élise, who for all her flaws is the best person I will ever know.

Not long after her death, a man called Ruddock came to see me at Versailles. Smelling of perfume that barely masked an almost overpowering body odour, he

came bearing a letter marked, TO BE OPENED IN THE EVENT OF MY DEATH.

The seal was broken.

‘You’ve read it?’ I asked.

‘Indeed, sir. With a heavy heart I did as instructed.’

‘It was to be opened in the event of her death,’ I said, feeling a little betrayed by the shake of emotion in my voice.

‘That’s right, sir. Upon receipt of the letter I placed it in a dresser, hoping never to see it again, if I’m honest with you.’

I fixed him with a stare. ‘Tell me the truth, did you read it *before* she died? Because if you did, then you could have done something about her death.’

Ruddock gave a slightly sad, airy smile. ‘Could I? I rather think not, Mr Dorian. Soldiers write such letters before battle, sir. The mere fact of them contemplating their own morality does not a postponement make.’

He’d read it, I could tell. He’d read it before she died.

I frowned, unfolded the paper and began to read Élise’s words for myself.

Ruddock,

Forgive the lack of pleasantries but I’m afraid I have reconciled my feelings towards you, and they are this: I don’t much like you. I’m sorry about this, and I appreciate you may consider it a rather rude thing to announce, but if you’re reading this then either you have ignored my instruction or I am dead and in either case neither of us should be concerned with matters of etiquette.

Now, notwithstanding the fact of my feelings towards you, I appreciate your attempts to make recompense for your actions, and I have been touched by your loyalty. It is for this reason that I would ask you to show this letter to my beloved Arno Dorian, himself an Assassin, and trust that he will take it as my testimonial to your changed ways. However, since I very much doubt the word of a deceased Templar will be enough to ingratiate yourself with the Brotherhood, I have something else for you, too.

Arno, I would ask that you pass the letters I am about to discuss to Monsieur Ruddock, in order that he may use them to curry favour with the Assassins in the hope of being accepted back into the creed. Monsieur Ruddock will be aware that this deed illustrates my trust in him and my faith that the task will be completed sooner rather than later, and for this reason will require no monitoring whatsoever.

Arno, the remainder of my letter is for you. I pray I will return from my confrontation with Germain and can retrieve this letter from Ruddock, tear it up and not think of its contents again. But if you’re reading it, it means, firstly, that my trust in Ruddock has been repaid, and, secondly, that I am dead.

There is much I have to tell you from beyond the grave, and to this end, I bequeath to you my journals, the most recent of which you will find in my satchel, the preceding ones being kept in a cache with the letters of which I speak. If, when inspecting the trunk, you reach the sad conclusion that I have not been treasuring letters you sent to me, please know that that reason why may be found within the pages of my journals. You will also find a necklace, given to me by Jennifer Scott.

The next page was missing.

‘Where’s the rest?’ I demanded to know.

Ruddock held out calm-down hands. ‘Ah, well now. The second page includes a special message regarding the location of the letters the mademoiselle says may prove my redemption. And, well, um, forgive the seeming rudeness, but it strikes me that if I give you this letter I have no “bargaining chip” as it were, and no guarantee that you won’t simply take the letters and use them to further your own standing within the Brotherhood.’

I looked at him, gesturing with the letter. ‘Élise asks me to trust you, and I ask you do the same in return for me. You have my word of honour that the letters will be yours.’

‘Then that is enough for me.’ He bowed and handed me the second page of the letter. I read it through until I reached the end …

> *… now, of course, I lie at the Cimetière des Innocents, and I am with my parents, close to those I love.*
>
> *Who I love most of all, though, Arno, is you. I hope you understand how much I love you. And I hope you love me, too. And for allowing me the honour of knowing such a fulfilling emotion, I thank you.*
>
> *Your beloved,*
> *Élise*

‘Does she say where the letters are?’ asked Ruddock hopefully.

‘She does,’ I told him.

‘And where is that, sir?’

I looked at him, saw him through Élise’s eyes and could see that there were some things too important to be left to newly won trust.

‘You’ve read it; you already know.’

‘She called it *Le Palais de la Misère*. And that means something to you, does it?’

‘Yes, thank you, Ruddock, it means something. I know where to go. Please leave your current address with me. I shall be in touch as soon as I have recovered the letters. Know that to thank you for what you have done I shall be endorsing any effort you make to win favour with the Assassins.’

He drew himself up a little and squared his shoulders. ‘For that I thank you … brother.’

iv.

There was a young man on a cart in the road. He sat with one leg up and his arms folded, squinting at me beneath a wide-brimmed straw hat, mottled by

sunlight that found its way through a canopy of leafy branches overhead. He was waiting – waiting, it turned out, for me.

‘Are you Arno Dorian, monsieur?’ he asked, sitting up.

‘I am.’

His eyes darted. ‘Do you wear a hidden blade?’

‘You think me an Assassin?’

‘Are you?’

With a snick it was out, glinting in the sunlight. Just as quickly I retracted it.

The young man nodded. ‘My name is Jacques. Élise was a friend to me, a good mistress to my wife, Hélène, and the close confidante of … a man who also lives with us.’

‘An Italian man?’ I asked, testing him.

‘No, sir,’ he grinned. ‘An Englishman who goes by the name of Mr Weatherall.’

I smiled at him. ‘I think you’d better take me to him, don’t you?’

On his cart Jacques led the way, and we took a path that led us along one side of a river. On the other bank was a stretch of manicured lawn that led up to a wing of the Maison Royale, and I looked at it with a mixture of sadness and bemusement – sadness because the mere sight of it reminded me of her. Bemusement because it was nothing like I had imagined from the satanic picture she had painted in her letters all those years ago.

We continued, as though we were skirting the school, which I supposed we were. Élise had mentioned a lodge.

Sure enough, we came upon a large-based low building in a clearing, with a couple of ramshackle outbuildings not far away. Standing on step of a porch was an older man on crutches.

The crutches were new, of course, but I half recognized the white beard from having seen him around the chateau when I was growing up. He had been someone who belonged to Élise’s ‘other’ life, her François and Julie life. Not someone I had ever concerned myself with then. Nor him with me.

And yet, of course, I write this entry having read Élise’s journals, and can now appreciate the position he held in her life, and again I marvel at how little I really knew of her; again I mourn the chance to have discovered the ‘real’ Élise, the Élise free of secrets to keep and a destiny to fulfil. I sometimes think that with all of that on her shoulders, we were doomed from the start, she and I.

‘Hello, son,’ he growled at me from the porch. ‘It’s been a long time. Look at you. I hardly recognize you.’

‘Hello, Mr Weatherall,’ I said, dismounting and tethering my horse. I approached him, and had I known then what I know now I would have greeted

him the French way with an embrace, and we would have shared the solidarity of bereavement, we who were the two men closest to Élise, but I didn't; he was merely a face from the past.

Inside the lodge the decor was simple, the furniture spartan. Mr Weatherall leaned on his crutches and ushered me to a table, requesting coffee from a girl I took to be Hélène, at whom I smiled and received a curtsey in return.

Again, I paid her less mind than I would have done had I read the journals. I was just taking the first steps into Élise's other life, feeling like an interloper, like I shouldn't be there.

Jacques entered, too, doffing an imaginary cap and greeting Hélène with a kiss. The atmosphere in the kitchen was bustling. Homely. No wonder Élise had liked it there.

'Was I expected?' I asked, with a nod at Jacques.

Mr Weatherall settled before he nodded thoughtfully. 'Élise wrote to say Arno Dorian might be collecting her trunk. Then a couple of days ago Madame Levene brought the news that she'd been killed.'

I raised an eyebrow. 'She wrote to you? And you didn't suspect there was anything wrong?'

'Son, I may have wood beneath my armpits but don't go thinking I've got it in my head. What I *suspected* was that she was still angry with me, not that she was making plans.'

'She was angry with you?'

'We'd had words. We parted on bad terms. The not-on-speaking-terms sort of terms.'

'I see. I have been on the receiving end of a number of Élise's tempers myself. It's never very pleasant.'

We looked at one another, smiles appearing. Mr Weatherall tucked his chin into his chest as he nodded with bitter-sweet remembrance. 'Oh yes, indeed. Quite a will on that one.' He looked at me. 'I expect that's what got her killed, is it?'

'What did you hear about it?'

'That the noblewoman Élise de la Serre was somehow involved in an altercation with the renowned silversmith François Thomas Germain, and that swords were drawn and the pair of them fought a battle that ended in their mutual death at each other's hands. That about how you saw it, was it?'

I nodded. 'She went after him. She could have exercised more caution.'

He shook his head. 'She never was one for exercising caution. She give him a good battle, did she?'

'She fought like a tiger, Mr Weatherall, a true credit to her sparring partner.'

The older man gave a short, mirthless laugh. ‘There was a time when I was sparring partner to François Thomas Germain as well, you know. Yes, you may well look like that. The treacherous Germain honed his own skills on a wooden blade wielded by Freddie Weatherall. Back then when it was unthinkable that a Templar might turn on Templar.’

‘Unthinkable? Why? Were Templars less ambitious when you were younger? Was the process of backstabbing in the name of advancement less developed?’

‘No,’ smiled Mr Weatherall, ‘just that we were younger, and that bit more idealistic when it came to our fellow man.’

v.

Perhaps we would have more to say to one another if we ever met again. As it was we two men who were closest to Élise had precious little in common, and when the conversation had at last withered and died like an autumn leaf, I asked to see the trunk.

He took me to it, and I carried it to the kitchen table and set it down, running my hands over the monogram EDLS, then opening it. Inside, just as she’d said, were the letters, her journals and the necklace.

‘Something else,’ said Mr Weatherall, and left, returning some moments later with a short sword. ‘Her first sword,’ he explained, adding it to the trunk with a disdainful look, as though I should have known instantly. As though I had a lot to learn about Élise.

Which, of course, I did. And now I understand that, and realize that I may have appeared a little haughty during my visit, as though these people were not worthy of Élise, when in reality it was the other way round.

I went to fill my saddlebags with Élise’s keepsakes, ready to transport them back to Versailles, stepping out into a clear and still moonlit night and going to my horse. I stood in the clearing, the buckle of a bag in my hand, when I smelled something. Something unmistakable. It was perfume.

vi.

Thinking we were on our way my mare snorted and pawed at the ground but I steadied her, patting her neck and sniffing the air at the same time. I licked a finger, held it up and verified that the wind was coming from behind me. I searched the perimeter of the clearing. Perhaps it was one of the girls from school who had made her way down here for some reason. Perhaps it was Jacques’s mother …

Or perhaps I recognized the scent of the perfume, and knew exactly who it was.

I came upon him hiding behind a tree, his white hair almost luminous in the moonlight.

‘What are you doing here?’ I asked him. Ruddock.

He pulled a face. ‘Ah, well, you see, I … well, you could say I was just wanting to safeguard my prize.’

I shook my head with irritation. ‘So you don’t trust me, after all?’

‘Well, do *you* trust *me*? Did Élise trust me? Do any of us trust each other, we who live our lives in secret societies?’

‘Come on,’ I said. ‘Inside.’

vii.

‘Who’s this?’

The occupants of the lodge, having turned in for bed just moments ago, reappeared: Hélène in a nightdress, Jacques in just his breeches, Mr Weatherall still fully dressed.

‘His name is Ruddock.’

I don’t think I’ve ever seen such a remarkable transformation as the one that came over Weatherall then. His face coloured, a look of fury crossing it as his glare descended on Ruddock.

‘Mr Ruddock plans to collect his letters then be on his way,’ I continued.

‘You didn’t tell me they were going to him,’ said Weatherall with a growl.

I cast him a look, thinking that I was growing tired of him, and that the sooner my business was concluded, the better.

‘There is bad blood between the two of you, I take it.’

Mr Weatherall merely glowered; Ruddock simpered.

‘Élise vouched for him,’ I told Mr Weatherall. ‘He is by all accounts a changed man, and has been forgiven for past misdemeanours.’

‘Please,’ Ruddock implored me, his eyes darting, clearly unnerved by the thunder that rolled across the face of Mr Weatherall, ‘just hand me the letters and I will go.’

‘I’ll get you your letters, if that’s what you want,’ said Mr Weatherall, moving over to the trunk, ‘but believe you me, if it wasn’t Élise’s wish you’d be picking them out of your throat.’

‘I loved her too in my own way,’ protested Ruddock. ‘She saved my life twice.’

By the trunk, Mr Weatherall paused. ‘Saved your life twice, did she?’

Ruddock wrung his hands. ‘She did. She saved me from the hangman’s noose and then from the Carrolls before that.’

Still standing by the trunk, Mr Weatherall nodded thoughtfully. ‘Yes, I remember she saved you from the hangman’s noose. But the Carrolls …’

A guilty shadow passed across Ruddock’s face. ‘Well, she told me at the time that the Carrolls were coming for me.’

‘You knew them did you, the Carrolls?’ asked Mr Weatherall innocently.

Ruddock swallowed. ‘I knew *of* them, of course I did.’

‘And you scarpered?’

He bristled. ‘As anybody in my position would have done.’

‘Exactly,’ said Mr Weatherall, nodding. ‘You did the right thing, missing all of the fun. Fact remains, though, they weren’t going to kill you.’

‘Then I suppose you’d have to say that Élise saved my life once. I hardly think it matters and, after all, once is enough.’

‘Unless they *were* going to kill you.’

Ruddock gave a nervous laugh, his eyes still flitting around the room. ‘Well, you’ve just said yourself they weren’t.’

‘But what if they were?’ pressed Mr Weatherall. I wondered what on earth he was getting at.

‘They weren’t,’ said Ruddock with a wheedling note in his voice.

‘How do you know?’

‘I beg your pardon?’

Sweat glistened on Ruddock’s brow and the smile on his face was lopsided and queasy. His gaze found mine as though searching for support, but he found none. I was just watching. Watching carefully.

‘See,’ continued Mr Weatherall, ‘I think you were working for the Carrolls back then, and you thought they were on their way to silence you – which they might well have been. I think that either you gave us false information about the King of Beggars or he was working on behalf of the Carrolls when they hired you to kill Julie de la Serre. That’s what I think.’

Ruddock was shaking his head. He tried a look of nonchalant bemusement, he tried a look of ‘this is outrageous’ indignation, and settled on a look of panic.

‘No,’ he said, ‘now this has gone far enough. I work for myself.’

‘But have ambitions to rejoin the Assassins?’ I prompted.

He shook his head furiously. ‘No, I’m cured of all that. And you know who finally cured me? Why, the fragrant Élise. She hated both of your orders, you know that? Two ticks fighting for control of the cat was what she called you. Futile and deluded, she called you, and she was right. She told me I’d be better off without you, and she was right.’ He sneered at us. ‘Templars? Assassins? I

piss on you all for a bunch of worthless old woman squabbling over ancient dogma.'

'So you have no interest in rejoining the Assassins, and thus no interest in the letters?' I asked him.

'None at all,' he insisted.

'Then what are you doing here?' I said.

The knowledge that the hole he'd dug was too deep flashed across his face and then he whirled and in one movement drew a brace of pistols. Before I could react he had grabbed Hélène, pointed one of the pistols at her head and covered the room with the other one.

'The Carrolls say hello,' he said.

viii.

As a new kind of tension settled over the room, Hélène whimpered. The flesh at her temple whitened where the barrel of the pistol pointed hard and she looked imploringly over Ruddock's forearm to where Jacques stood coiled and ready to strike, fighting the need to get over there, free Hélène and kill Ruddock with the need not to spook him into shooting her.

'Perhaps,' I said after a silence, 'you might like to tell me who these Carrolls are.'

'The Carroll family of London,' said Ruddock, one eye on Jacques who stood tensed, his face in furious knots. 'At first they hoped to influence the path of the French Templars, but then Élise upset them by killing their daughter, which gave it a somewhat "personal" dimension.

'And of course they did what any good doting parent with a lot of money and a network of killers at their disposal would do – they ordered revenge. Not just on her but on her protector – oh, and I'm sure they'll pay handsomely for these letters into the bargain.'

'Élise was right,' said Mr Weatherall to himself. 'She never believed the Crows tried to kill her mother. She was right.'

'She was,' said Ruddock almost sadly, as though he wished Élise could be here to appreciate the moment. I wished she was here, too. I'd have enjoyed watching her take Ruddock apart.

'Then it's over,' I told Ruddock simply. 'You know as well as we do that you can't possibly kill Mr Weatherall and leave here alive.'

'We shall see about that,' said Ruddock. 'Now open the door, then step away from it.'

I stayed where I was until he cast me a warning look at the same time as eliciting a shout of pain from Hélène with the barrel of the pistol. And then I opened the door and moved a few steps to the side.

‘I can offer you a trade,’ said Ruddock, pulling Hélène round and backing towards the black rectangle of the entrance.

Jacques, still tensed and dying to get at Ruddock; Mr Weatherall, furious but thinking, thinking; and me, watching and waiting, fingers flexing on the hidden blade.

‘His life for hers,’ continued Ruddock, indicating Mr Weatherall. ‘You allow me to kill him now, and I free the girl when I’m clear.’

Mr Weatherall’s face was very, very dark. The fury seemed to roll off him in waves. ‘I would sooner take my own life than allow you to take it.’

‘That’s your choice. Either way your corpse is on the floor when I leave.’

‘And what happens to the girl?’

‘She lives,’ he said. ‘I take her with me, then let her go when I’m clear and sure you’re not trying to double-cross me.’

‘How do we know you won’t kill her?’

‘Why would I?’

‘Mr Weatherall,’ I began. ‘There’s no way we’re letting him take Hélène. We’re not –’

Mr Weatherall interrupted me. ‘I beg your pardon, Mr Dorian, let me hear it from Ruddock here. Let me hear the lie from his mouth, because the bounty isn’t just for Élise’s protector, is it, Ruddock? It’s for her protector *and* her lady’s maid, isn’t it, Ruddock? You’ve no intention of letting Hélène go.’

Ruddock’s shoulders rose and fell as his breathing became heavier, his options narrowing by the second.

‘I’m not leaving here empty-handed,’ he said, ‘just so you can hunt me down and kill me another time.’

‘What other choice do you have? Either people die and one of them is you, or you leave and spend the rest of your life as a marked man.’

‘I’m taking the letters,’ he said finally. ‘Hand me the letters and I’ll let the girl go when I’m clear.’

‘You’re not taking Hélène,’ I said. ‘You can take the letters but Hélène never leaves this lodge.’

I wonder if he appreciated the irony that had he not followed me, had he just waited in Versailles, I would have brought him the letters.

‘You’ll come after me,’ he said uncertainly. ‘As soon as I let go of her.’

‘I won’t,’ I said. ‘You have my word of honour. You may have your letters and leave.’

He seemed to decide. ‘Give me the letters,’ he demanded.

Mr Weatherall reached into the trunk, took the sheaf of letters and held them up.

‘*You,*’ Ruddock told Jacques, ‘lover boy. Put the letters on my horse and bring it round then shoo away the Assassin’s mount. Be fast and get back here or she dies.’

Jacques looked from me to Mr Weatherall. We both nodded and he darted out into the moonlight.

The seconds passed and we waited, Hélène quiet now, watching us over Ruddock’s forearm as he covered me with the pistol, his eyes on me, not paying much attention to Mr Weatherall, thinking he posed no threat.

Jacques returned, sidling inside with his eyes on Hélène, waiting to collect her.

‘Right, is everything ready?’ asked Ruddock.

I saw Ruddock’s plan flash across his eyes. I saw it so clearly he might as well have said it out loud. His plan was to kill me with the first shot, Jacques with the second, deal with Hélène and Weatherall by blade.

Perhaps Mr Weatherall saw it, too. Perhaps Mr Weatherall had been planning his move all along. Whatever the truth, I don’t know, but in the same moment as Ruddock shoved Hélène away from himself and swung his gun arm towards me, Mr Weatherall’s hand appeared from within the trunk, the sheath to Élise’s short sword flipped up and away and the sword itself was in his fingers.

And it was so much larger than a throwing knife that I thought he couldn’t possibly find his target, but of course his knife-throwing skills were at their best and the sword twirled and I dived at the same time, hearing the shot and the ball zip past my ear as one sound, regaining my balance and springing my hidden blade, ready to leap and plunge it into Ruddock before he loosed his second shot.

But Ruddock had a sword in his face, his eyes swivelling in opposite directions as his head snapped back and he staggered, his second shot going safely into the ceiling as his body teetered back, then he fell, dead before he hit the floor.

On Mr Weatherall’s face was a look of grim satisfaction, as though he had laid a ghost to rest.

Hélène ran to Jacques and then for some while we just stood, the four of us, looking at one another and at Ruddock’s prone body, barely able to believe it was all over, and that we had survived.

And then, once we had carried Ruddock outside for burial the next day, I collected my horse and went to continue loading my saddlebags. As I did so I

felt Hélène's hand on my arm and gazed into eyes that were bloodshot from crying, but no less sincere for that.

'Mr Dorian, we'd love you to stay,' she said. 'You could take Élise's bedchamber.'

I've stayed here ever since, out of sight and, perhaps even where the Assassins are concerned, out of mind.

I've read Élise's journals, of course, and realized that though we didn't know enough of each other in our adult lives, I still knew her better than anyone else, because we were the same, she and I, kindred spirits sharing mutual experiences, our paths through life virtually identical.

Except, as I said before, Élise had got there first, and it was she who had come to the conclusion that there could be unity between Assassin and Templar. Finally, from her journal had slipped a letter. It read …

Dearest Arno,

If you are reading this then either my trust in Ruddock has been justified, or his greed has prevailed. In either case, you have my journals.

I trust having read them you may understand me a little more and be more sympathetic to the choices I have made. I hope you can see now that I shared your hopes for a truce between Assassin and Templar, and to that end have one final request of you, my darling. I ask that you take these principles back to your brothers in the creed and evangelize on their behalf. And when they tell you that your ideas are fanciful and naive, remind them how you and I proved that differences of doctrine can be overcome.

Please do this for me, Arno. And think of me. Just as I shall think of you until we are together again.

Your beloved,
Élise

'Please do this for me, Arno.'

Sitting here now, I wonder if I have the strength. I wonder if I could ever be as strong as she was. I hope so.

List of Characters

Pierre Bellec: Assassin
Jean Burnel: Templar and associate of Mr Weatherall
May Carroll: English Templar
Mr Carroll: English Templar and father to May
Mrs Carroll: English Templar and mother to May
Arno Dorian: orphan taken in by the La Serres and, later, Assassin
Charles Dorian: Assassin, father to Arno
François Thomas Germain: excommunicated Templar and, later, Grand Master
Hélène: lady's maid to Élise and, later, wife to Jacques
Captain Byron Jackson: smuggler
Jacques: illegitimate son of Madame Levene and, later, husband to Hélène
King of Beggars: henchman of Germain and, later, Templar
Chretien Lafrenière: one of the Crows, advisor to Grand Master de la Serre
Élise de la Serre: Templar and future Grand Master
Julie de la Serre: Templar and mother to Élise
François de la Serre: Templar Grand Master and father to Élise
Aloys la Touche: henchman of the King of Beggars, Templar
Louis-Michel Le Peletier: one of the Crows, advisor to Grand Master de la Serre
Madame Levene: headmistress of the Maison-Royale
Madame Levesque: one of the Crows, advisor to Grand Master de la Serre
Maximilien de Robespierre: founder of the Cult of the Supreme Being, ally of Germain
Jennifer Scott: English Templar and Haytham Kenway's sister
Charles Gabriel Sivert: one of the Crows, advisor to Grand Master de la Serre and, later, ally of Germain

Freddie Weatherall: English Templar and protector of Élise de la Serre
Bernard Ruddock: excommunicated Assassin
Honoré Gabriel Riqueti: Comte de Mirabeau and Assassin Grand Master

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And also

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Sébastien Puel
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Tommy François
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ASSASSIN'S CREED®

Underworld

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Part One

Ghost Town

1

The Assassin Ethan Frye was leaning on a crate in the shadows of Covent Garden Market, almost hidden by the tradesmen's carts. His arms were folded across his chest, chin supported in one hand, the soft, voluminous cowl of his robes covering his head. And as the afternoon dwindled into evening he stood, silent and still. Watching. And waiting.

It was rare for an Assassin to rest his chin on his leading hand like that. Especially if he was wearing his hidden blade, which Ethan was, the point of it less than an inch from the exposed flesh of his throat. Closer to his elbow was a light but very powerful spring mechanism designed to deploy the razor-sharp steel; the correct flick of his wrist and it would activate. In a very real sense, Ethan was holding himself at knifepoint.

And why would he do this? After all, even Assassins were not immune to accidents or equipment malfunction. For safety's sake the men and women of the Brotherhood tended to keep their blade hands clear of the face. Better that than risk ignominy or worse.

Ethan, however, was different. Not only was he practised in the art of counter-intelligence – and resting his chin on his strongest arm was an act of deception designed to fool a potential enemy – but he also took a dark delight in courting danger.

And so he sat, with his chin in his hand, watching, and waiting.

Ah, he thought, *what is this*? He straightened and shook the rest from his muscles as he peered through the crates into the market. Traders were packing up. And something else was happening too. The game was afoot.

2

In an alleyway not far from Ethan lurked a fellow by the name of Boot. He wore a tattered shooting jacket and a broken hat, and he was studying a pocket watch lifted from a gentleman not moments ago.

What Boot didn't know about his new acquisition was that its erstwhile owner had intended to take it to the menders that very day, for reasons that were shortly to have a profound effect on the lives of Ethan Frye, Boot, a young man who called himself The Ghost and others involved in the eternal struggle between the Templar Order and the Assassin Brotherhood. What Boot didn't know was that the pocket watch was almost exactly an hour slow.

Oblivious to that fact, Boot snapped it shut, thinking himself quite the dandy. Next he eased himself out of the alleyway, looked left and right and then made his way into the dying day of the market. As he walked, his shoulders hunched and his hands in his pockets, he glanced over his shoulder to check he wasn't being followed and, satisfied, continued forward, leaving Covent Garden behind and entering the St Giles Rookery slum.

The change in the air was almost immediate. Where before his boot heels had rung on the cobbles, now they sank into the ordure of the street, disturbing a stink of rotting vegetable and human waste. The pavements were thick with it, the air reeking. Boot pulled his scarf over his mouth and nose to keep out the worst of it.

A wolfish-looking dog trotted at his heel for a few paces, ribs visible at its shrunken belly. It appealed to him with hungry, red-rimmed eyes but he kicked it away and it skittered then shrank off. Not far away, a woman sat in a doorway wearing the remnants of clothes tied together with string, a baby held to her breast as she watched him with glazed dead eyes, rookery eyes. She might be the mother of a prostitute, waiting for her daughter to come home with the proceeds and woe betide the girl if she returned empty-handed. Or she might command a team of thieves and blaggers, soon to appear with the day's takings. Or perhaps she ran night lodgings. Here in the rookery the once-grand houses had been converted to flats and tenements, and by night they provided refuge for those in need of shelter: fugitives and families, whores, traders and labourers – anyone

who paid their footing in return for space on a floor and who got a bed if they were lucky and had the money, but most likely had to make do with straw or wood shavings for a mattress. Not that they were likely to sleep very soundly anyway: every inch of floor space was taken, and the cries of babies tore through the night.

And while many of these people were unfit or unwilling to work, many more had occupations. They were dog-breakers and bird dealers. They sold watercress, onions, sprat or herring. They were costermongers, street sweepers, coffee dealers, bill stickers and placard carriers. Their wares came into the lodgings with them, adding to the overcrowding, to the stench. At night the houses would be closed, broken windows stuffed with rags or newspaper, sealed against the noxious atmosphere of the night, when the city coughed smoke into the air. The night air had been known to suffocate entire families. Or so was the rumour. And one thing that spread about the slums more quickly than disease was rumour. So as far as the slum dwellers were concerned, Florence Nightingale could preach as much as she liked. They were going to sleep with the windows sealed.

You could hardly blame them, thought Boot. If you lived in the slum your chances of dying were great. Disease and violence were rife here. Children risked being suffocated when adults rolled over in their sleep. Cause of death: overlaying. It was more common at weekends when the last of the gin had been drunk and the public houses emptied, and Mother and Father felt their way home in the soupy fog, up the slick stone steps, through the door and into the warm, stinking room where they at last laid down their heads to rest …

And in the morning, with the sun up but the smog yet to clear, the rookery would ring to the screams of the bereaved.

Deeper into the slum went Boot, where tall buildings crowded out even the meagre light of the moon, and fog-bound lanterns glowed malevolently in the dark. He could hear raucous singing from a public house a few streets along. Every now and then the singing would grow louder as the door was thrown open to eject drunkards on to the street.

There were no pubs on this street, though. Just doors and windows wadded with newspaper, washing hanging from lines overhead, sheets of it like the sails of a ship, and, apart from the distant singing, just the sound of running water and his own breathing. Just him … alone.

Or so he thought.

And now even the distant singing stopped. The only sound was dripping water.

A scuttling sound made him jump. ‘Who’s that?’ he demanded, but knew immediately it was a rat, and it was a pretty thing when you were so scared you were jumping at the sound of a rat. A pretty thing indeed.

But then it came again. He whirled and thick air danced and eddied around him, and it seemed to part like curtains and for a moment he thought he saw something. A suggestion of something. A figure in the mist.

Next he thought he heard breathing. His own was short and shallow, gasping almost, but this was loud and steady and coming from – where? One second it seemed to be ahead of him, the next from behind. The scuttling came again. A bang startled him, but it came from one of the tenements above. A couple began arguing – he had come home drunk again. No, *she* had come home drunk again. Boot allowed himself a little smile, found himself relaxing a bit. Here he was, jumping at ghosts, scared of a few rats and a pair of old birds quarrelling. Whatever next?

He turned to go. In the same moment the mist ahead of him billowed and striding out of it came a figure in robes, who before he could react had grabbed him and pulled his fist back as though to punch him, only instead of striking out, his assailant flicked his wrist and with a soft snick a blade shot from within his sleeve.

Boot had squeezed his eyes shut. When he opened them it was to see the man in robes behind the blade that was held steady an inch from his eyeball.

Boot wet himself.

3

Ethan Frye awarded himself a small moment of satisfaction at the accuracy of his blade – then swept Boot's legs from beneath him and slammed him to the filthy cobbles. The Assassin sank to his haunches, pinning Boot with his knees as he pressed his blade to his throat.

'Now, my friend,' he grinned, 'why don't we start with you telling me your name?'

'It's Boot, sir,' squirmed Boot, the point of the knife digging painfully into his flesh.

'Good man,' said Ethan. 'Good policy, the truth. Now, let's you and me have a talk, shall we?'

Beneath him the fellow trembled. Ethan took it as a yes. 'You're due to take delivery of a photographic plate, am I right, Mr Boot?' Boot trembled. Ethan took that as another yes. So far so good. His information was solid; this Boot was a connection in a pipeline that ended with erotic prints being sold in certain pubs in London. 'And you are due at the Jack Simmons to collect this photographic plate, am I right?'

Boot nodded.

'And what's the name of the fellow you're supposed to meet, Mr Boot?'

'I … I don't know, sir …'

Ethan smiled and leaned even closer to Boot. 'My dear boy, you're a worse liar than you are a courier.' He exerted a little more pressure with the blade. 'You feel where that knife is now?' he asked.

Boot blinked his eyes yes.

'That's an artery. Your carotid artery. If I open that, you'll be painting the town red, my friend. Well, the street at least. But neither of us want me to do that. Why ruin such a lovely evening? Instead, how about you tell me who it is you planned to meet?'

Boot blinked. 'He'll kill me if I do.'

'That's as maybe, but I'll kill you if you don't, and only one of us is here holding a knife at your throat, and it's not him, is it?' Ethan increased the pressure. 'Make your choice, my friend. Die now, or later.'

Just then Ethan heard a noise to his left. Half a second later his Colt sidearm was in his hand, the blade still at Boot's throat as he drew aim on a new target.

It was a little girl on her way back from the well. Wide-eyed she stood, a bucket brimming full of dirty water in one hand.

'I'm sorry, miss, I didn't mean to startle you,' smiled Ethan. His revolver went back into his robes and his empty hand reappeared to assure the girl he wasn't a threat. 'I mean harm only to ruffians and thieves such as this man here. Perhaps you might like to return to your lodgings.' He was gesturing to her but she wasn't going anywhere, just staring at them both, eyes white in a grubby face, rooted to the spot with fear.

Inwardly Ethan cursed. The last thing he wanted was an audience. Especially when it was a little girl watching him hold a blade to a man's throat.

'All right, Mr Boot,' he said, more quietly than before, 'the situation has changed so I'm going to have to *insist* you tell me exactly who you intended to meet …'

Boot opened his mouth. Maybe he was about to give Ethan the information he required. Or perhaps he was going to tell Ethan where he could stick his threats. Or more likely it was to simply whine that he didn't know.

Ethan never found out, because just as Boot went to reply, his face disintegrated.

It happened a twinkling before Ethan heard the shot, and he rolled off the body and drew his revolver just as a second crack rang out, and he remembered the girl too late, his head whipping round just in time to see her spin away, blood blooming at her chest, and drop her bucket at the same time – dead before she hit the cobbles from a bullet meant for him.

Ethan dared not return fire for fear of hitting another unseen innocent in the fog. He pulled himself into a crouch, steeling himself for another shot, a third attack from the dark.

It never came. Instead there was the sound of running feet, so Ethan wiped the shards of bone and bits of brain from his face, holstered the Colt and flicked his hidden blade back into its housing, and then leapt for a wall. Boots only just gaining purchase on the wet brick, he shinned a drainpipe to the roof of a tenement, finding the light of the night sky and able to follow the running footsteps as the shooter tried to make his escape. This was how Ethan had entered the rookery and it looked like this was how he was going to leave, making short leaps from one roof to the next, traversing the slum as he tracked his quarry silently and remorselessly, the image of the little girl seared on to his mind's eye, the metallic smell of Boot's brain matter still in his nostrils.

Only one thing mattered now. The killer would feel his blade before the night was out.

From below he heard the boots of the shooter clopping and splashing on the cobbles and Ethan shadowed him quietly, unable to see the man but knowing he'd overtaken him. Coming to the edge of a building, and feeling he had a sufficient lead, he let himself over the side, using the sills to descend quickly, until he reached the street, where he hugged the wall, waiting.

Seconds later came the sound of running boots. A moment after that the mist seemed to shift and bloom as though to announce this new presence, and then a man in a suit, with a bushy moustache and thick side whiskers, came pelting into view.

He held a pistol. It wasn't smoking. But it might as well have been.

And though Ethan would later tell George Westhouse that he struck in self-defence it wasn't strictly true. Ethan had the element of surprise; he could – and should – have disarmed the man and questioned him before killing him. Instead he engaged his blade and slammed it into the killer's heart with a vengeful grunt and watched with no lack of satisfaction as the light died in the man's eyes.

And by doing that the Assassin Ethan Frye was making a mistake. He was being careless.

'My intention had been to press Boot for the information I needed before taking his place,' Ethan told the Assassin George Westhouse the following day, having finished his tale, 'but what I didn't realize was that Boot was late for his appointment. His stolen pocket watch was slow.'

They sat in the drawing room of George's Croydon home. 'I see,' said George, 'At what point did you realize?'

'Um, let me see. That would be the point at which it was too late.'

George nodded. 'What was the firearm?'

'A Pall Mall Colt, similar to my own.'

'And you killed him?'

The fire crackled and spat into the pause that followed. Since reconciling with his children, Jacob and Evie, Ethan was pensive. 'I did, George, and it was nothing less than he deserved.'

George pulled a face. 'Deserve has nothing to do with it. You know that.'

'Oh, but the little girl, George. You should have seen her. She was just a tiny wee thing. Half Evie's age.'

'Even so …'

'I had no choice. His pistol was drawn.'

George looked at his old friend with concern and affection. ‘Which is it, Ethan? Did you kill him because he deserved it, or because you had no choice?’

A dozen times or more Ethan had washed his face and blown his nose, but he still felt as though he could smell Boot’s brains. ‘Must the two be mutually exclusive? I’m thirty-seven years of age and I’ve seen more than my fair share of kills, and I know that notions of justice, equity and retribution play a distant second to skill, and skill subordinate to luck. When Fortune turns her face to you. When the killer’s bullet goes elsewhere, when he drops his guard, you take your chance, before she turns away again.’

Westhouse wondered who his friend was trying to fool, but decided to move on. ‘A shame then that you had to spill his blood. Presumably you needed to know more about him?’

Ethan smiled and mock-wiped his brow. ‘I was rewarded with a little luck. The photographic plate he carried bore an inscription identifying the photographer, so I was able to ascertain that the dead man and the photographer were one and the same, a fellow by the name of Robert Waugh. He has Templar associations. His erotic prints were going one way, to them, but also another way, to the rookeries and alehouses, via Boot.’

George whistled softly. ‘What a dangerous game Mr Waugh was playing …’

‘Yes and no …’

George leaned to poke the fire. ‘What do you mean?’

‘I meant that in many ways his gamble of the two worlds staying separate paid off. I saw the slums afresh today, George. I was reminded of how the poor are living. This is a world so completely separate from that of the Templars that it’s scarcely believable the two share the same country, let alone the same city. If you ask me, our friend Mr Waugh was perfectly justified in believing the paths of his disparate business enterprises might never cross. The two worlds in which he operated were poles apart. The Templars know nothing of the rookeries. They live upriver of the factory filth that pollutes the water of the poor, and upwind of the smog and smoke that pollutes their air.’

‘As do we, Ethan,’ said George sadly. ‘Whether we like it or not, ours is a world of gentlemen’s clubs and drawing rooms, of temples and council chambers.’

Ethan stared into the fire. ‘Not all of us.’

Westhouse smiled and nodded. ‘You’re thinking of your man, The Ghost? Don’t suppose you have any thoughts about telling me who The Ghost is or what he is doing?’

‘That must remain my secret.’

‘Then what of him?’

‘Aha, well, I have formulated a plan, involving the recently deceased Mr Waugh and The Ghost. If all goes well, and The Ghost can do his job, then we may even be able to lay our hands on the very artefact the Templars seek the Piece of Eden.’

4

John Fowler was tired. And cold. And by the look of the gathering clouds he was soon to be wet.

Sure enough, he felt the first drops of rain tap-tapping on his hat, and the engineer clutched his leather-bound tube of drawings more tightly to his chest, cursing the weather, the noise, everything. Beside him stood the Solicitor of London, Charles Pearson, as well as Charles's wife Mary, both flinching as the rain began to fall, and all three stood marooned by mud, gazing with a mixture of forlornness and awe at the great scar in the earth that was the new Metropolitan line.

Some fifty yards in front of the trio the ground gave way to a sunken shaft that opened into a vast cutting – 'the trench' – twenty-eight feet in width and some two hundred yards long, at which point it stopped being a cutting or trench and became a tunnel, its brickwork arch providing a gateway to what was the world's very first stretch of underground railway line.

What's more, the world's first *operational* stretch of underground railway line: trains ran on the newly laid rails night and day, pushing wagons heaped with gravel, clay and sand from unfinished sections further up the line. They chugged back and forth, smoke and steam near suffocating the gangs of navvies working at the mouth of the tunnel, who shovelled earth into the leather buckets of a conveyor that in turn brought the spoil to ground level.

The operation was Charles Pearson's baby. For almost two decades the Solicitor of London had campaigned for a new line to help ease the growing congestion in London and its suburbs. The construction of it, meanwhile, was John Fowler's brainchild. He was, quite apart from being the owner of remarkably luxuriant whiskers, the most experienced railway engineer in the world, and thus had been the obvious candidate for chief engineer of the Metropolitan Railway. However, as he'd told Charles Pearson on the occasion of his employment, his experience might count for naught. This was, after all, something that had never been done before: a railway line beneath the ground. A huge – no, a *gargantuan* – undertaking. Indeed, there were those who said that it

was the most ambitious building project since the construction of the pyramids. A grand claim, for sure, but there were days that Fowler agreed with them.

Fowler had decided that the majority of the line, being of shallow depth, could be dug using a method known as ‘cut and cover’. It involved sinking a trench into the earth, twenty-eight feet in width, fifteen feet deep. Brick retaining walls were built into it, three bricks thick. In some sections iron girders were laid across the top of the side walls. Others were made using brickwork arches. Then the cutting was covered and the surface reinstated, a new tunnel created.

It meant destroying roads and houses, and in some cases building temporary roadways, only to have to rebuild them. It meant moving thousands of tons of spoil and negotiating gas and water mains and sewers. It meant forging a never-ending nightmare of noise and destruction, as though a bomb had detonated in London’s Fleet Valley. No. As though a bomb was detonating in the Fleet Valley every day and had done for the last two years.

Work continued overnight, when flares and braziers would be lit. Navvies laboured in two major shifts – the change signalled by three tolls of a bell at midday and midnight – and smaller duty-shifts when men would move between tasks, swapping one back-breaking and monotonous job for another, but working, always working.

Much of the noise came from the seven conveyors used on the project, one of which was erected here: a tall wooden scaffold built into the shaft, towering twenty-five feet above them, an agent of dirt and ringing noise, like hammer blows on an anvil. It brought spoil from further along the excavation, and men worked it now, gangs of them. Some were in the shaft, some on the ground, some dangling like lemurs off the frame, their job to ensure the passage of the conveyor as giant buckets full of clay were hoisted swinging from the trench.

On the ground, men with spades toiled at a mountain of excavated earth, shovelling it on to horse-drawn wagons, four of which waited, each with a cloud of gulls hanging over it, the birds swirling and dipping to pick up food, unconcerned by the rain that had begun to fall.

Fowler turned to look at Charles, who appeared ill – he held a handkerchief to his lips – but otherwise in good humour. There was something indomitable about Charles Pearson, reflected Fowler. He wasn’t sure if it was resolve or lunacy. This was a man who had been laughed at for the best part of two decades, indeed, from when he’d first suggested an underground line. ‘Trains in drains’, so the scoffing went at the time. They’d laughed when he’d unveiled his plans for an atmospheric railway, carriages pushed through a tube by compressed air. *Through a tube*. Little wonder that for over a decade Pearson was a fixture of *Punch* magazine. What fun was had at his expense.

Then, with everybody still chortling at that, there came a scheme, Pearson's brainchild – a plan to build an underground railway between Paddington and Farringdon. The slums of the Fleet Valley would be cleared, their inhabitants moved to homes outside the city – to the suburbs – and people would use this new railway to 'commute'.

A sudden injection of money from the Great Western Railway, the Great Northern Railway and the City of London Corporation, and the scheme became a reality. He, the noted John Fowler, was employed as chief engineer for the Metropolitan Railway and work began on the first shaft at Euston – almost eighteen months ago to the day.

And were people still laughing?

Yes, they were. Only now it was a jagged, mirthless laugh. Because to say that Pearson's vision of the slum clearance had gone badly was to put it mildly. There were no homes in the suburbs and as it turned out, nobody especially willing to build any. And there's no such thing as an undercrowded slum. All those people had to go somewhere, so they went to other slums.

Then, of course, there was the disruption caused by the work itself: streets made impassable, roads dug up, businesses closing and traders demanding compensation. Those who lived along the route existed in an eternal chaos of mud, of engines, of the conveyor's iron chime, of hacking picks and shovels and navvies bellowing at one another, and in perpetual fear of their foundations collapsing.

There was no respite; at night fires were lit and the night shift took over, leaving the day shift to do what men on day shifts do: drink and brawl their way through to morning. London had been invaded by navvies it seemed; everywhere they went they made their own – only the prostitutes and publicans were glad of them.

Then there were the accidents. First a drunken train driver had left the rails at King's Cross and plummeted into the works below. Nobody hurt. *Punch* had a field day. Then almost a year later the earthworks at Euston Road had collapsed, taking with them gardens, pavements and telegraph wires, destroying gas and water mains, punching a hole in the city. Incredibly, nobody was hurt. Mr Punch enjoyed that episode too.

'I'd hoped to hear good news today, John,' shouted Pearson, raising his handkerchief to his mouth. A finicky thing, like a doily. He was sixty-eight to Fowler's forty-four but he looked twice that; his efforts over the last two decades had aged him. Despite his ready smile there was permanent tiredness round the eyes, and the flesh at his jowls was like melted wax on a candle.

‘What can I tell you, Mr Pearson?’ shouted Fowler. ‘What would you like to hear other than …?’ He gestured over the site.

Pearson laughed. ‘The roar of the engines is encouraging, that’s true enough. But perhaps also that we’re back on schedule. Or that every compensation lawyer in London has been struck dead by lightning. That Her Majesty the Queen herself has declared her confidence in the underground and plans to use it at the first opportunity.’

Fowler regarded his friend, again marvelling at his spirit. ‘Then I’m afraid, Mr Pearson, I can give you nothing but bad news. We are still behind schedule. And weather like this simply delays work further. The rain will likely douse the engine and the men on the conveyor will enjoy an unscheduled break.’

‘Then there is some good news,’ chortled Pearson.

‘And what’s that?’ shouted Fowler.

‘We will have –’ the engine spluttered and died – ‘silence.’

And for a moment there was indeed a shocked still as the world adjusted to the absence of the noise. Just the sound of rain slapping on the mud.

Then came a cry from the shaft: ‘*slippage*’, and they looked up to see the crane scaffold lurch a little, one of the men suddenly dangling even more precariously than before.

‘It’ll hold,’ said Fowler, seeing Pearson’s alarm. ‘It looks worse than it is.’

A superstitious man would have crossed his fingers. The navvies were taking no chances either, and the gangs on the crane scrambled to ground level, swarming the wooden struts like pirates on rigging, hundreds of them it seemed, so that Fowler was holding his breath and willing the structure to hold the sudden extra weight. It should. It must. It did. And the men emerged shouting and coughing, carrying shovels and pickaxes, which were as precious to them as their limbs. They gathered in knots that would divide along regional lines, every single one of them caked in mud.

Fowler and Pearson watched them congregate in the expected groups – London, Irish, Scottish, rural, other – hands shoved into their pockets or wrapped round them for warmth, shoulders hunched and caps pulled tight against the rain.

Just then there came a shout and Fowler turned to see a commotion by the trench. As one the navvies had moved over to look and now surrounded the lip of the shaft, staring at something inside the cutting.

‘*Sir!*’ the site manager Marchant was waving at him, beckoning him over. He cupped his hands to shout. ‘Sir. You should come and see this.’

Moments later Fowler and Pearson had made their way across the mud, the men parting to let them through, and they stood at the top of the trench looking

down – past the struts and buckets of the silent conveyor to the lake of muddy water that had formed at the bottom and was already rising.

Bobbing in it was a body.

5

The rain had eased off, thank God, and the water level in the trench had fallen, but the machines remained silent. With a hand on his hat, Marchant had rushed away to inform his immediate boss, Cavanagh, a director of the Metropolitan Railway, while another man had been sent to find a bobby. It was the peeler who arrived first, a young constable with bushy side whiskers who introduced himself as Police Constable Abberline and then cleared his throat and removed his custodian helmet in order to get down to the business of seeing the body.

‘Has anybody been down to it, sir?’ he asked Pearson, indicating the trench.

‘The area was cleared as soon as it was discovered, constable. You can imagine it caused quite a stir.’

‘Nobody likes to see a dead body before their elevenses, sir.’

Those assembled watched as the peeler leaned tentatively to stare into the trench and then signalled to a man nearby. ‘Do you mind, mate?’ he said, and handed the worker his helmet, then unbuckled and removed his belt, truncheon and handcuffs before descending the ladder to inspect the corpse at close quarters.

They crowded round to stare down into the cutting and watch as he stepped round the body, lifting one arm and then the other. Presently, the peeler crouched and the watchers held their breath in expectation as he turned over the body.

In the trench, Abberline swallowed, unaccustomed to being on show and wishing he’d left instructions that the men be asked to move back. They lined both sides of the trench. Even the figures of Fowler and Mr and Mrs Pearson were there. All of them were gazing down at him fifteen feet below.

Right. He turned his attention back to the corpse, putting aside all self-conscious thoughts to concentrate on the job at hand.

The body then. Face down in the mud, with one arm raised as though trying to hail a carriage, the dead man wore a tweed suit. His brown boots were well shod, and though covered in mud were otherwise in good condition. *Not the attire of a derelict*, thought Abberline. Crouching, heedless of the mud that soaked his clothes he took a deep breath and reached to the man’s shoulders, grunting with the effort as he rolled him over.

From above came a ripple of reaction but Abberline had his eyes closed, wanting to delay the moment he saw the man's face. With trepidation he opened them and stared into the dead gaze of the corpse. He was in his late thirties and had a bushy white-flecked Prince Albert moustache that looked cared for, as well as thick side whiskers. By the looks of him he wasn't a rich man but neither was he a worker. Like Abberline he was one of the new middle classes.

Either way, this was a man with a life, whose next of kin, when they were informed, would want an explanation as to how he ended up in a trench at New Road.

This was, without doubt – and Abberline couldn't help but feel a small, slightly shameful thrill at the thought of it – an investigation.

He tore his gaze away from the man's sightless open eyes and looked down at his jacket and shirt. Visible despite the mud was a bloodstain with a neat hole at the centre. If Abberline wasn't very much mistaken, a puncture wound.

Abberline had seen victims of stab wounds before, of course, and he knew that people armed with knives stabbed and slashed the same way they punched. In quick haphazard multiples: *bomf, bomf, bomf*.

But this was a single wound, direct into the heart. What you might call a clean kill.

By now, Abberline was vibrating with excitement. He'd feel guilty about that later, remembering that there was, after all, a dead man involved, and you shouldn't really feel anything but sorrow for him and his family in that situation, and certainly not excitement. But even so …

He began a quick search of the body and found it immediately: a revolver. Christ, he thought, this was a geezer armed with a gun who'd lost a fight with a knifeman. He pushed the gun back into a jacket pocket.

'We'll need to lift this body out of here,' he called up in the general direction of the bossmen. 'Sirs, could you help me to cover him and put him in a cart for taking to the police morgue?'

With that he started to ascend the ladder, just as orders were called out and a team of men began to descend the other ladders with varying degrees of eagerness and trepidation. At the top, Abberline stood wiping his mucky hands on the seat of his trousers. At the same time he scanned the lines of assembled men, wondering if the killer was in there somewhere, admiring his handiwork. All he saw was row upon row of dirty faces, all watching him intently. Others still crowded around the mouth of the cutting, watching as the body was brought up then laid on the flatbed of a cart. The tarpaulin flapped as it was shaken out then draped over him, a shroud, the face of the dead man hidden again.

By now it had started to rain in earnest, but Abberline's attention had been arrested by the sight of a smartly dressed man making his way over the boards that crossed the expanse of mud towards them. Not far behind lolloped a lackey carrying a large leather-bound journal, its laces dancing and jerking as the lackey tried unsuccessfully to keep up with his master.

'Mr Fowler! Mr Pearson!' called the man, gesturing with his cane and instantly commanding their attention. The entire site quietened, but in a new way. There was much shuffling of feet. Men were suddenly studying their boots intently.

Oh yes? thought Abberline. *What have we here?*

Like Fowler and Pearson the new arrival wore a smart suit, though he wore it with more style – in a way that suggested he was used to catching the eye of a passing lady. He had no paunch and his shoulders were squared, not stooped with stress and worry like his two colleagues. Abberline could see that when he doffed his hat it would be to reveal a full head of almost shoulder-length hair. But though his greeting was warm, his smile, which was a mechanical thing that was off as quickly as it was on, never reached his eyes. Those ladies impressed by his mode of dress and general demeanour might well have thought twice upon seeing the look in those cold and piercing eyes.

As the man and his lackey drew close to them Abberline looked first at Pearson and Fowler, noting the discomfort in their eyes and the hesitation in Charles Pearson as he introduced the man. 'This is our associate, Mr Cavanagh, a director of the Metropolitan company. He oversees the day-to-day running of the dig.'

Abberline touched his brow, thinking to himself, *What's your story then*?

'I hear a body has been discovered,' said Cavanagh. He had a large scar on the right side of his face, as though somebody had once used a knife to underline his eye.

'Indeed, sir, it has,' sighed Pearson.

'Let's see it then,' demanded Cavanagh, and in the next moment Abberline drew back the tarpaulin only for Cavanagh to shake his head in non-recognition. 'Nobody I know, thank God, and not one of ours by the looks of him. A soak. A drunk like the poor soul serenading us over there, no doubt.'

He waved at where, on the other side of the fence, a broken-down man stood watching them, occasionally breaking into song as he brandished a bottle of something foul and broken.

Cavanagh turned his back on the cart. 'Marchant! Get these men back to work. We've lost enough time as it is.'

‘No,’ came a lone voice, and it was the voice of Mrs Pearson. She took a step in front of her husband. ‘A man has died here, and as a mark of respect we should suspend the dig for the morning.’

Cavanagh’s automatic smile was switched on. Instantly oleaginous he swiped his tall hat from his head and bowed low. ‘Mrs Pearson, please forgive me, how remiss it is of me to forget that there are more delicate sensibilities present. However, as your husband will attest, we are often the site of misadventures and I’m afraid that the mere presence of a dead body is not enough to prevent the tunnel work continuing.’

Mrs Pearson turned. ‘Charles?’ In return her husband lowered his eyes. His gloved hands fretted at the handle of his stick.

‘Mr Cavanagh is correct, my dear. The poor soul has been removed; work must continue.’

She looked searchingly at her husband, who averted his gaze, then Mrs Pearson picked up her skirts and left.

Abberline watched her go, noting Cavanagh’s air of sly triumph as he went about the business of mustering Marchant and the men, and the sadness in the face of Charles Pearson, a man torn, as he too turned to leave in the wake of his wife.

Meanwhile, Abberline had to get this corpse to Belle Isle. His heart sank to think of it. There was scarcely a worse place on the whole of God’s green earth than the Belle Isle slum.

Among the men who were, at that very moment, being urged, cajoled, bullied and threatened back to work by the site manager was a young Indian worker who, though he appeared on the worksheet as Bharat, and if any of the men working beside him were curious enough to ask that was the name he would give them, thought of himself by another name.

He thought of himself as The Ghost.

To all outward appearances The Ghost was unremarkable. He wore similar clothes to the other navvies: shirt, neck scarf, railwayman’s cap, waistcoat and work coat – though no boots, he went barefoot – and he was a competent, conscientious worker, no better or worse than the next man, and he was perfectly personable should you engage him in conversation, not especially loquacious and certainly not the sort to initiate a conversation, but then again not particularly retiring either.

But The Ghost was always watching. Always watching. He’d caught sight of the body and by good fortune had been close enough to look before the order was given to evacuate the trench. He’d also seen the drunkard by the fence and

in the ensuing commotion had been able to catch his eye and then, as if responding to an itch he had rubbed his own chest, a tiny insignificant gesture practically invisible to anybody else.

And then he'd watched as Abberline arrived. He'd watched Cavanagh come bustling on to the site, and he'd watched very carefully indeed as the tarpaulin was drawn back and Cavanagh had gazed down upon the face of the dead man and hidden his look of recognition.

Oh, he was good. The Ghost had to give him that. Cavanagh's powers of concealment were almost on a par with his own, but his eyes had flickered briefly as he looked down upon the face. He knew the man.

Now The Ghost watched as Abberline left on the cart, taking the body to Belle Isle no doubt.

And he watched as shortly after Abberline had left, the drunk had departed also.

6

Prince Albert had been dead some months, and though his taste in facial hair lived on, his adherence to decency and good manners had evidently failed to percolate through to the general public. Quite the reverse it seemed; there was a pall that hung over London, dark and malignant. Some blamed it on the queen's absence; she mourned Albert still and had taken to the Highlands to do so. Others said the overcrowding was to blame – the terrible stink, the poverty and crime – among them those madmen who thought the best way to solve that problem was by building an underground railway. Still others said that actually it was not the overcrowding that was to blame; rather it was the construction of the underground railway that had thrown the city into disarray. This last group were apt to point out that the underground railway had thus far exacerbated overcrowding by evicting thousands of tenants from their homes in the Fleet Valley, the city's biggest slum. Which was true; it had.

Ah, but at least we've got rid of the city's biggest slum, said the first group.

Not really, scoffed the second group. You've just moved another slum into first place.

Have patience, pleaded the first group.

No, said the second, we won't.

Sitting on the board of his cart, reins held loosely in one hand, Abberline thought it over, how the higher-ups made decisions in the clubs and boardrooms that affected us all. And to what end? For the greater good? Or their own personal benefit? A line from Lord Tennyson's poem about the charge of the Light Brigade sprang to mind: '*Theirs not to reason why, theirs but to do or die*.'

His cart clattered over the rails towards where the tall, spired buildings of Belle Isle appeared like a smudge of dirt on the horizon. Already he could smell the foul stench of the horse slaughterers, the bone boilers, fat-melters, chemical works, firework makers and the lucifer-match factories.

To his left some poor deluded idiot had made a valiant attempt to grow a kitchen garden but it was overrun with sickly weeds that climbed the iron fences sprouting on either side of him. Dirty, barely clothed children were running in the wasteland on either side, lobbing old tin cans at one another, scurrying in the

street outside the cottages. Inside each home were rooms and wash houses, and at night the householders and their tenants would cram inside, just as they would at the Rookery.

His cart came past the horse slaughterers. Under the arch went living horses, whose sense of smell and instinct must surely have warned them what lay ahead, and in the factory they would be put to death, then the flesh boiled in copper vats for cat food.

Outside in the yards men stripped to the waist used sledgehammers to break up bones, watched by ever-present groups of children clad in filthy rags tinged yellow from the sulphur in the air.

Abberline saw a group who had obviously tired of watching – after all, it wasn't an activity with an awful lot of variety – and set up a game of cricket instead. Without the usual equipment they'd improvised with part of an old bedstead for a bat, while the ball was … Abberline winced. Oh God. They were using the decapitated head of a kitten.

He was about to shout across to them, to urge them for pity's sake to use something else for a ball, when he became aware of a child who had wandered in front of the cart, forcing him to pull up.

'Oi,' he called, waving an irate hand at the young ruffian, 'police business. Get out of the bleedin' way.'

But the scruffy urchin didn't move. 'Where are you off to, sir?' he asked, taking the head of the horse in both hands, stroking it. The sight softened Abberline's heart a little, and he forgot his irritation as the boy rubbed his fingertips over the animal's ears, enjoying the rare intimacy of the moment: boy and horse.

'Where are you off to, sir?' the boy repeated, tearing his eyes off the horse and turning his urchin gaze on Abberline. 'Not to the knacker's yard with this one, I hope. Say it ain't so.'

In his peripheral vision Abberline sensed a movement and turned to see three other young scallywags climb beneath the fence and come on to the road behind him. *Let them*, he thought. *Nothing of value back there*. Not unless you counted a soggy corpse and the tarpaulin.

'No, don't worry yourself, son, I'm off to the mortuary with a body on the back.'

'A body, is it?' This came from the rear. One of the new arrivals.

A couple more children had arrived by now. A little crowd of them milling around.

'Oi, you, get out of it,' warned Abberline. 'Nothing back there to interest you.'

'Can we have a look, sir?'

‘No you bloody well can’t,’ he called over his shoulder. ‘Now get out of it before you feel the business end of my truncheon.’

The first boy stood petting the horse still, raising his face to speak to Abberline again. ‘Why is the police involved, sir? Did this one meet a sticky end?’

‘You might say that,’ replied Abberline, impatient now. ‘Stand aside, son, and let me past.’

The cart bounced and jerked and he was about to turn to admonish the kids who were obviously trying to peek beneath the tarpaulin, ghoulish little sods, when it bounced again and this time Abberline, irritated and wanting to get the hell out of Belle Isle, shook the reins decisively.

‘Walk on,’ he commanded. If the kid stood in the way, well, that was his lookout.

He drew forward and the child was forced to step aside. As he passed, Abberline looked down to see the young urchin smiling inscrutably up at him. ‘Good luck with your body, sir,’ he said, touching his knuckle to his forelock in a derisive way that Abberline didn’t care for. In return he merely grunted and shook the reins again, setting his face forward. He went past the rest of the houses to the mortuary gate, where he coughed loudly to rouse a worker who’d been dozing on a wooden chair and who tipped his hat and let him through into the yard.

‘What have we got here?’ said a second mortuary worker as he emerged from a side door.

Abberline had clambered down from the cart. At the entrance, sleepyhead closed the gates, behind him the Belle Isle slum like a sooty thumbprint on a window. ‘Body I need keeping cold for the coroner,’ replied Abberline, securing the reins as the attendant went to the rear of the wagon, lifted the tarp, peered beneath, then dropped it again.

‘You want the knacker’s yard,’ he said simply.

‘Come again?’ said Abberline.

The attendant sighed and wiped his hands on his apron. ‘Unless this is your idea of a joke you want the bleedin’ knacker’s yard is what I said.’

Abberline paled, already thinking of his encounter with the slum children and the way his cart had shook, remembering how his attention had been arrested, cleverly, perhaps, by the kid nuzzling the neck of his horse.

And sure enough, when he skidded to the back of the cart and swept back the tarpaulin, it was to see that the body from the trench had gone; in its place a dead pony.

7

Every night The Ghost made the same journey home, which took him along the New Road and past Marylebone Church. In the churchyard, among the ramshackle and raggle-taggle groupings of headstones was one in particular that he would look at as he went by.

If the stone was upright, as it was most evenings, that meant no message. If the stone leaned to the right, it meant danger. Just that: danger. It was up to The Ghost to work out what manner of danger.

However, if it leaned to the left then it meant his handler wanted to see him: usual time, usual place.

And then, having performed that check, The Ghost began his five-mile walk home to Wapping and his living quarters at the Thames Tunnel.

It had once been called one of the great wonders of the world, and even at ground level it cut an imposing figure among the surrounding buildings: a spired octagonal marble building acting as an entrance hall. Entering through doors that were never shut, he crossed the mosaic floor to reach a side-building, the watch-house. During the daytime pedestrians had to pay a penny to pass through and reach the steps down into the tunnel, but not at night. The brass turnstile was closed but The Ghost climbed over, just as everybody did.

Ice had formed on the marble steps that spiralled round the inside of the shaft, so he trod more carefully than usual as he descended to the first platform, and then to the next, and finally to the bottom of the shaft – the grand rotunda, more than two hundred and fifty feet underground. Once it had been vast and opulent, now it was merely vast. The walls were dirty, the statues scruffy. The years had had their say.

Even so, it was still a sight to see: alcoves set into grubby stucco walls. Inside the nooks, curled beneath sacks, slept the people of the rotunda: the necromancers, fortune tellers and jugglers who in the daytime plied their trade to those visiting the tunnel, the famous Thames Tunnel.

The first of its kind anywhere, ever, the Thames Tunnel stretched from here, Wapping, below the river to Rotherhithe and had taken fifteen years to build, almost defeating Mr Marc Brunel and claiming the life of his son Isambard, who

had near drowned in one of the floods that had plagued its construction. Both had hoped to see their tunnel used by horse-drawn carriages, but had been undone by the cost, and instead it became a tourist attraction, visitors paying their penny to walk its thousand-feet length, an entire subterranean industry springing forth to serve them.

The Ghost moved from the entrance hall to the black mouth of the tunnel itself, its two arches pointing at him like the barrels of pistols. It was wide and its ceiling high, but the brickwork pressed in and each footfall became an echo, while the sudden change in atmosphere made him more aware of the gloom. In daytime hundreds of gas lamps banished the darkness but at night the only illumination belonged to the flickering candles of those who made the tunnel their home: traders, mystics, dancers and animal handlers, singers, clowns and street dealers. It was said that two million people a year took a walk down the tunnel, and had done since it opened some nineteen years ago. Once you had a place at the tunnel opening you didn't leave it, not for fear that some other hawker might steal it with you absent.

The Ghost looked over the slumbering bodies of the tradesmen and entertainers as he passed by, his footsteps ringing on the stone floor. He peered into alcoves and passed his lantern over those sleeping under the arches of the partition that ran the length of the tunnel.

A strict hierarchy operated inside the tunnel. The tradesmen took their places at the mouth. Further along, the derelicts, the homeless, the vagrants, the wretched; and then even further along, the thieves, criminals and fugitives.

Come morning time, the traders, who had a vested interest in making sure the tunnel was free of vagrants and as sanitary as possible, were enthusiastic in helping the peelers clear out the tunnel. The blaggers and fugitives would have departed under cover of darkness. The rest of them, the vagabonds, beggars, prostitutes, would come grumbling and blinking into the light, clutching their belongings, ready for another day of surviving on nothing.

The Ghost's lantern played over a sleeping figure in the gloom of an alcove. The next alcove was empty. He swung the torch to illuminate the arches of the tunnel partition and they too were vacant. He sensed the miserly light receding behind him, the glow given off by his lantern so very meagre all of a sudden, dancing eerily on the brick.

From within the darkness had come a scuttling sound and he raised his light to see a figure crouched in a nook ahead of him.

'Hello, Mr Bharat,' said the boy in a whisper.

The Ghost went to him, reaching into his coats for a thick crust of bread he'd put there earlier. 'Hello, Charlie,' he said, handing it over. The boy flinched a

little, far too accustomed to the slaps and punches of grown-ups, then took the bread, staring at The Ghost with grateful eyes as he bit into it, cautiously at first.

They did it every night. The same flinch. The same caution. And every night The Ghost, who knew nothing of the boy's background, just that it involved violence and abuse, smiled at him, said, 'See you tomorrow night, Charlie. Take care of yourself,' and left the boy in his alcove, his heart breaking as he made his way further into the tunnel.

Again he stopped. Here in another alcove lay a man with a leg broken from a fall on the icy steps of the rotunda. The Ghost had set the leg and he held his breath against the stench of piss and shit to check that his splint was still in place and that the leg was on the mend.

'You're a fine lad, Bharat,' growled his patient.

'Have you eaten?' asked The Ghost, attending to the leg. He was not a man of delicate sensibilities but even so – Jake was ripe.

'Maggie brought me some bread and fruit,' said Jake.

'What would we do without Maggie?' wondered The Ghost aloud.

'We'd die, son, is what we'd do.'

The Ghost straightened, pretending to look back up the tunnel in order to take a lungful of uncontaminated air – relatively speaking. 'Leg is looking good, Jake,' he said. 'Another couple of days and you might be able to risk a bath.'

Jake chuckled. 'That bad, eh?'

'Yes, Jake,' said The Ghost, patting his shoulder. 'I'm afraid it's that bad.'

The Ghost left, pressing further on into the tunnel, until he came to the last of the alcoves used for sleeping. Here was where he and Maggie stayed. Maggie, at sixty-two, was old enough to be his grandmother, but they looked after one another. The Ghost brought food and money, and every night he taught Maggie to read by the light of a candle.

Maggie, for her part, was the tunnel mother, a rabble-rousing mouthpiece for The Ghost when he needed one, an intimidating, redoubtable figure. Not to be trifled with.

Beyond this point few people dared to tread. Beyond this point was the darkness, and it was no coincidence that this was where The Ghost had made his home. He stayed here as a kind of border guard, protecting those who slept in the tunnel from the miscreants and malfeasants, the lawbreakers and fugitives who sought shelter in its darker regions.

Before he had arrived the outlaws would prey upon those who lived in the tunnel. It had taken a while. Blood had been spilt. But The Ghost had put a stop to that.

8

On the night that The Ghost had first met Maggie, he had been taking his route back home – if you could call it ‘home’, his lodging, his resting place in the tunnel.

Occasionally, as he walked, he let his mind drift back to his real home, Amritsar in India, where he had grown up.

He remembered spending his childhood and adolescence roaming the grounds of his parents’ house and then the ‘katras’ – the different areas of the city itself. Memory can play tricks on you – it can make things seem better or worse than they really were, and The Ghost was fully aware of that. He knew he was in danger of idealizing his childhood. After all, how easy it would be to forget that Amritsar, unlike London, had not yet acquired a drainage system and thus rarely smelled of the jasmine and herbs that he recalled so vividly. He might forget that those walled streets which loomed so large in his recollections had played host to characters as unsavoury as anywhere else in India. Possibly the sun didn’t really bathe the entire city in golden light all day and all night, warming the stone, making the fountains glimmer, painting smiles on the faces of those who made the city their home.

Possibly not. But that was how he remembered it anyway, and if he was honest that was how he preferred to remember it. Those memories kept him warm in the tunnel at night.

He was born Jayadeep Mir. Like all boys he idolized his father, Arbaaz Mir. His mother used to say that his father smelled of the desert and that was how The Ghost remembered him too. From an early age Arbaaz told Jayadeep that greatness lay ahead of him, and that he would one day be a venerated Assassin, and he had made this future sound as thrilling as it was inevitable. In the comfortable confines of his loving parents’ home, Jayadeep had grown up knowing great certainty.

Arbaaz liked to tell stories just as much as Jayadeep loved to hear them, and best of them all was the story of how Arbaaz had met his wife, Pyara. In this one, Arbaaz and his young mute servant, Raza Soora, had been trying to find the Koh-i-Noor diamond, the Mountain of Light. It was during his attempts to

retrieve the diamond from the Imperial Palace that Arbaaz became involved with Pyara Kaur, granddaughter of Ranjit Singh, the founder of the Sikh Empire.

The Koh-i-Noor diamond was what they called a Piece of Eden, those artefacts distributed around the globe that were the sole remnants of a civilization that preceded our own.

Jayadeep knew of their power because his parents had seen it for themselves. Arbaaz, Pyara and Raza had all been there the night the diamond was activated. They had all seen the celestial lightshow. Talking of what they'd witnessed, his parents were candid about the effect it had upon them. What they'd seen had made them more devout and more fervent in their belief that such great power should never be wielded by their enemies, the Templars. They instilled that in the boy.

Back then, growing up in an Amritsar painted gold by the sun and being mentored by a father who was like a god to him, Jayadeep could not have conceived of a day when he might be named The Ghost, huddled in a freezing dark tunnel, alone in the world, venerated by nobody.

Training had begun when he was four or five years old, but although it was physically demanding work it had never seemed like a chore; he had never complained or played truant, and there was one very simple reason for this: he was good at it.

No. More than that. He was great. A natural from the day he was handed his first wooden training blade, a kukri. Jayadeep had a gift for combat such as had been rarely witnessed in the Indian Brotherhood. He was extraordinarily, almost supernaturally, fast in attack, and more than usually responsive in defence; he boasted tremendous powers of observation and anticipation. He was so good, in fact, that his father felt impelled to call upon another tutor.

Into the boy's life came Ethan Frye.

Meeting Ethan Frye was among The Ghost's earliest memories: this tired-looking, melancholy man, whose Western robes seemed to hang heavier on him than those of his father.

Just a tiny child, the boy had neither the inclination nor the initiative to ask about Ethan Frye. As far as he was concerned, the elder Assassin might as well have fallen from the skies, tumbled to earth like a downhearted angel come to sully his otherwise idyllic existence.

'This is the boy then?' Ethan had asked.

They had been sitting in the shaded courtyard at the time, the clamour of the streets outside drifting over the wall and joining the birdsong and the soft tinkle of a fountain.

'This is indeed the boy,' said Arbaaz proudly. 'This is Jayadeep.'

‘A great warrior you say.’

‘A great warrior in the making – or at least I think so. I’ve been training him myself and I’ve been astonished, Ethan, *astonished* by his natural aptitude.’ Arbaaz stood, and in the house behind him Jayadeep glimpsed his mother, seeing the two of them at once. For the first time, perhaps due to the presence of this gruff stranger, he was aware of their beauty and grace. He saw them as people rather than just his parents.

Without taking his eyes from the boy, Ethan Frye clasped his hands over his belly and spoke over his shoulder to Arbaaz. ‘Supernatural in his abilities, you say?’

‘It is like that, Ethan, yes.’

Eyes still on Jayadeep. ‘Supernatural, eh?’

‘Always thinking two or three moves ahead,’ answered Arbaaz.

‘As one should.’

‘At six years old?’

Ethan turned his gaze on Jayadeep once again. ‘It’s precocious, I’ll admit, but …’

‘I know what you’re going to say. That so far he has been sparring with me and as father and son we naturally share a bond and that maybe, just maybe, I’m exhibiting certain tells that give him the edge, yes?’

‘It had crossed my mind.’

‘Well, that’s why you’re here. I’d like you to take charge of training Jayadeep.’

Intrigued by the boy, Ethan Frye agreed to Arbaaz’s request and from that day he took up residence at the house, drilling the boy in swordcraft.

The boy, knowing little of what drove Ethan, was confused at first by his new tutor’s gruff manners and rough tone. Jayadeep was not one to respond to the touch of a disciplinarian, and it had taken some months for the two of them to form a tutor–pupil relationship that wasn’t characterized by sour asides (Ethan), harsh words (Ethan) and tears (Jayadeep).

For some time, in fact, Jayadeep believed that Ethan Frye simply did not like him, which came as something of a culture shock. The boy was handsome and charismatic. He knew next to nothing of the adult world and although he remained oblivious to concepts such as charm and persuasion he was instinctively adept at being both charming and persuasive, able to twist his family and household round his little finger, seemingly at will. He was the sort of little boy that grown-ups loved to touch. Never was a boy’s hair so constantly ruffled by the men, his cheek rarely lasting longer than half an hour without one of the household women praising his smile and planting a kiss on him, inhaling

his fresh little-boy smell at the same time, silently luxuriating in the softness of his skin.

It was as though Jayadeep were a drug to which all who met him became addicted.

All, that was, except Ethan, who wore a permanently pensive and preoccupied expression. It was true that occasionally the light would come to him, and when it did Jayadeep fancied he saw something of the ‘old’ or maybe the ‘real’ Ethan, as though there were a different Ethan struggling to peer out from beneath the gloom. Otherwise it seemed that whatever Jayadeep had that intoxicated other grown-ups simply failed to work on his tutor.

These were the rather shaky foundations on which their tutorials were built: Ethan, in a grey study; Jayadeep confused by this new type of grown-up, who didn’t lavish him with affection and praise. Oh, of course Ethan was forced to offer grudging praise for Jayadeep’s skills in combat. How could he not? Jayadeep excelled at every aspect of Assassin craft, and in the end it was this more than anything that cracked open their relationship, because if there’s one thing a skilled Assassin can admire and appreciate, even grow to like, it’s an initiate with promise. And Jayadeep was most certainly that.

So, as the years passed, and master and pupil sparred in the shade of the courtyard trees, discussed theory by the fountains, and then put their teachings into practice in the streets of the city, it was as though Ethan began to thaw towards his young charge, and when he spoke of taking the boy from wood to steel there was an unmistakable note of pride in his voice.

For his part, Jayadeep began to learn a little about his reflective mentor. Enough, in fact, for him to realize that ‘glum’ was the wrong adjective, and that ‘troubled’ was more accurate. Even at that age he was remarkably intuitive.

What’s more, there came a day when he overheard the women in the kitchen talking. He and Ethan were practising a stealth exercise in the grounds of the house, and Ethan had commanded him to return with information obtained using covert means.

When The Ghost thought about this years later, it occurred to him that sending a small child to gather covert information was a plan fraught with possible pitfalls, not least that the child might learn something unsuitable for young ears.

Which, as it turned out, was exactly what happened.

As he was later to learn, though, Ethan was, despite outward appearances, prone to making the odd rash and hasty decision, as well as being possessed of what you might call a sense of mischief, and thinking back, Ethan’s instructions for the exercise were perhaps the first time Jayadeep saw an outward manifestation of this in his tutor.

So Jayadeep went on his exercise and two hours later joined Ethan at the fountain. He took a seat on the stone beside where his master sat looking pensive as usual, choosing not to acknowledge Jayadeep as was his custom. Like everything else about Ethan, this had taken Jayadeep time to get used to, and getting used to it was a process that involved moving first from being offended to being confused and lastly accepting that his lack of warmth was in its own way a measure of the familiarity the two of them shared, these two men so far apart in age and culture – one of them an experienced killer, the other training to be one.

'Tell me, my dear boy, what did you learn?' asked Ethan.

Ethan calling Jayadeep 'my dear boy' was a relatively new development. One that pleased Jayadeep, as it happened.

'I learnt something about you, master.'

Maybe then Ethan regretted sending his young charge on this particular assignment. It's difficult to imagine that he had planned it, but then who can say what was in Ethan Frye's mind. Who can ever say? The boy had no way of knowing, but as an eager pupil and one who had been schooled in observation he naturally watched his tutor closely for signs that he might have caused offence or stepped over a line.

'This was tittle-tattle you overheard was it, son?'

'"Tittle-tattle", master?'

'Tittle-tattle means gossip – and, as I've always told you, gossip can be a very powerful information tool. You did well to glean what you could from what you overheard.'

'You're not angry?'

A certain placid look had crossed Ethan's features. As though some feeling of internal turmoil were being laid to rest. 'No, Jayadeep,' he said, 'I'm not angry with you. Pray tell me what it was that you heard.'

'You might not like it.'

'I don't doubt it. Go ahead anyway.'

'The women were saying that you had a wife in England but that she died giving birth to your two children.'

It was as though the courtyard stilled as the boy awaited his master's response.

'That's true, Jayadeep,' said Ethan after a while, exhaling through a sigh. 'And when I tried to look at my children, Evie and Jacob, I found I could not. Invited back to India, I suppose you would have to say that I fled, Jayadeep. I fled my home in Crawley and my children to come here and swelter in the sun with you.'

Jayadeep thought of his own mother and father. He thought of the love and affection they lavished upon him and his heart went out to these two children. He

had no doubt they were looked after, but even so they lacked a father's love.

'But not for much longer,' said Ethan, as though reading Jayadeep's mind. He stood. 'I'm to return to England, to Crawley, to Jacob and Evie. I shall see to it that you move on to steel; I shall satisfy myself you will be ready in combat, and then I will return home and there, Jayadeep, I shall do what I feel I should have done in the first place: I shall be a father to my two children.'

Ethan's words rang with a significance that Jayadeep, for all his intuition, failed to pick up on. In his own way Ethan was confessing to Jayadeep that his friendship with the boy had awakened a parental instinct unseen since his wife had died. In his own way Ethan was thanking the boy.

Jayadeep, though, had heard the word 'combat'.

And it was some time after that – in fact, once the boy had made the transition from wood to steel, that Ethan discovered the boy had a weakness. A serious weakness.

9

On the night he first met Maggie, then, The Ghost had been returning home to his place in the tunnel, when he passed Marylebone churchyard, as he always did, and glanced to check the angle of the stone, as he always did, but found his attention arrested by events taking place in the graveyard.

It was dark, of course – this was almost exactly a year ago, when the days were as short as they were now – and it was cold too, the kind of night where you didn't hang around in darkened churchyards unless you had a very good reason to be hanging around in a darkened churchyard.

And nobody had business to be in a darkened churchyard on a night like that. Not any kind of business that wasn't wicked business.

Sure enough, what The Ghost heard was very wicked business indeed.

He stopped on the pathway by the low church wall. Listened. And he decided that on a scale of wickedness, with not-very-wicked at one end (some fornication, perhaps: a consensual business proposition conducted between a prostitute and her client), he was hearing something from the other end. And what he heard was the sound of several men – The Ghost knew instantly it was five men – some of whom were laughing and urging others on, as well as the sound of violence, of boots being used in a way their innocent maker never intended, and above all that the sound of a woman – The Ghost knew instantly it was one woman – in pain. In very great pain.

There were others who passed by, of course, who would have heard the commotion in the churchyard, the unmistakable sound of a woman screaming and calling for mercy as the blows rained in, but it was only The Ghost who stopped. He shouldn't have done. His job was to blend in at all times. But he stopped because he was an Assassin – he was still an Assassin – trained by Arbaaz Mir and Ethan Frye, instilled in the values of the Brotherhood.

And he was damned if he was going to walk on by while five men got their jollies beating up a woman.

He vaulted the low stone wall that acted as the churchyard boundary and moved further into the gloom. The noises continued. The drunken, boisterous

sound of men at play. From their accents The Ghost was able to tell that two of them were gentlemen, the other three of indeterminate class.

Now he saw the glow of lanterns, and what he made out in a clearing in the shadow of the great church were two well-dressed men and a figure on the floor.

‘What do you call that?’ one of them was saying as he stood astride her, slapping her face, the second man laughing and swigging from a flask.

In the foreground were three bigger men, all of whom wore bowler hats. They stood with their backs to the two gents and their victim. Bodyguards. They stiffened as The Ghost navigated the graves towards them. Arbaaz and Ethan would have advised a stealthy intrusion; The Ghost could have killed two of the men before they had even had a chance to react. But what he saw had awakened in him a primal anger, a sense of righteous justice, and he wanted a confrontation. He wanted justice to be done and for justice to be seen to be done.

‘Move along, mate,’ said one of the bodyguards. He had his arms folded. ‘Nothing for you to see here, lad.’

The other two bodyguards had shifted. One of them had his hands pushed deep into the pockets of his coat. The other clasped his hands behind his back.

‘Let the woman go,’ said The Ghost.

The two men had stopped their game, and they stood away from the prone and bleeding body of the woman. Released, she groaned with a mixture of pain and relief and rolled over to one side, her skirts in disarray at her legs, face bloodied behind a tangle of matted hair. A poor, pitiable creature, she looked to be in her sixties.

‘Move away from her,’ commanded The Ghost.

One of the toffs sniggered and passed the flask to the second man, whose eyes twinkled with delight as he put it to his lips and drank greedily. Both looked as if they were anticipating the beginning of an entertaining show. Standing there, a lone man against five, The Ghost hoped he wouldn’t disappoint.

He also hoped that with all his fine thoughts of seeing justice done, he hadn’t bitten off more than he could chew.

The first bodyguard tilted his chin and spoke again, his words dropping like stones in the newly still churchyard. ‘Move along, my lad, before we do it for you.’

The Ghost regarded him. He regarded them all. ‘I’ll move on when I’m satisfied the woman will be harmed no longer …’

‘Well, that …’

‘And when I’m satisfied that the two men who did this to her have been sufficiently punished.’

The other two bodyguards burst out laughing but the leader stilled them with a hand. ‘Well, now, look, that ain’t going to happen, because you see these two gen’men here? They pay handsomely for the services of myself and my two colleagues, specifically to ensure that no harm comes to them as they tour the less salubrious sides of this nation’s great capital, if you catch my meaning. To get to them you have to come through us, and you know, don’t you, that ain’t gonna ’appen.’

Behind him the two pleasure-seeking toffs tittered some more, passing the flask back and forth, enjoying the show, an aperitif prior to the main course. They were weak and drunk and The Ghost knew he could take them both with one hand tied behind his back, but …

First the bodyguards. Number three’s coat was unbuttoned, his hands still clasped behind his back. Either he was carrying a revolver or a cutlass hanging at his flank. He looked dangerous but also a little too relaxed, too confident.

The same went for number two. He wore an ankle-length coat buttoned up, and though his left hand flexed in the pocket of his coat, his right hand was motionless, which meant he’d be holding a cosh or knife in there.

Good. He was wearing a coat that was not conducive to close-quarter combat and, secondly, though unwittingly, he’d shown The Ghost from where his weapon would appear. For these two reasons The Ghost would target him first. He would be easiest to overcome, and he needed a weapon. He hoped it was a knife.

Number one was cleverer. He didn’t think a lone attacker would face up to five without good reason. His arms had remained folded across his chest – he carried a shoulder holster, perhaps? – but his eyes had roamed the area behind The Ghost, seeking out whatever reinforcements might be lurking there.

When he saw nothing he regarded The Ghost with even greater interest, suspicion and apprehension, guessing what his colleagues did not even suspect: that this Indian lad was playing some kind of angle. That he was more than he seemed to be. Number one was sharper. He would be the hard one.

The Ghost had finished sizing them up. He wished he held a kukri in one hand and had his hidden blade strapped to his other wrist. Were that the case the battle’s outcome would be in no doubt. What’s more, it would have ended some moments ago. But even so he was confident he could prevail. He had certain factors on his side: that his foes were largely underestimating him; that he was disgusted and supremely motivated; that he was highly trained and very adept and very fast and had assessed his distance, his surroundings, his opponents.

And now came one more thing in his favour. For, as number one began to speak, saying the words, ‘I’ll give you one last chance, lad …’ The Ghost

awarded himself the advantage of surprise.

And he struck.

Number two was still trying to pull his hands free of his coat pockets when The Ghost's forehead smashed into his nose. This blow – a 'dirty trick' that Arbaaz had never fully endorsed but of which Ethan was most fond – had the advantage of causing massive pain, instant, traumatic blood loss and temporary blindness and disorientation. For the first crucial moments of the battle, number two was incapacitated. He was out of the game, unable to resist as The Ghost spun and jabbed an elbow back to knock the wind out of him as his other hand delved into the coat pockets and found … a cosh. *Damn*.

But it had some weight at least, and he pulled it out of the coat then swung back in the other direction, the black leather cosh connecting with the temple of number two. The Ghost swung hard, with all his might, which was a lot of might indeed, and the blow almost took the top of his target's head off.

The second man had been reaching inside his coat at the time, but The Ghost never got to find out what he had inside. The man's hand was still inside his coat as he staggered to one side with his mouth gaping like a fish on dry land. The ball bearings in the cosh had opened a gash in the side of his head and blood was already pouring from it. He would probably live, but would be brain-damaged, likely to spend the rest of his days in a bath chair drooling, being fed mushed-up food on a spoon and lacking the faculties to wonder how a mere boy had so easily bested him in a fight. The Ghost stepped forward, punched him twice in the throat and his body was still folding to the floor as The Ghost spun back round.

The whole move was over in the time it took to draw a sword, which was exactly what number one had done. Between them both was number two, reeling from the headbutt, yet still on his feet and about to gain control of his senses when The Ghost, keen not to relinquish his forward momentum, struck once more, swinging with the cosh and not making full contact but doing enough to break the man's jaw. He kicked out at the same time, this one a clean connect, snapping the bodyguard's leg, which folded beneath him and sent him sprawling to the dirt of the churchyard. This one would never walk again and the broken jaw meant that very few people would understand him when he spoke.

In the same movement The Ghost lashed out with his other foot, kicking a lantern into the face of number one, who was hoping to use the opening to his advantage. The bodyguard knocked the lantern away with a cry of surprise and frustration that his move had met failure, and it gave The Ghost a moment to gather himself.

He checked his balance, moved away from the possible obstacle of a nearby headstone and shifted the cosh from one hand to the other, then back again.

The guardian gathered himself. He raised his cutlass, moved into position between The Ghost and the two men he was paid to protect, and then he called to them over his shoulder. What he said was, ‘Sirs, run.’

The two toffs needed no further invitation, stumbling over one another and crashing into the stones as they took their leave, disappearing noisily into the night. Behind them on the floor lay the flask of booze.

The Ghost clenched his teeth. He couldn’t let them get away.

‘You don’t have to die for the likes of them,’ he told the bodyguard, who gave a short chuckle.

‘You’re wrong, my friend,’ he replied. ‘Dying for the likes of them is *exactly* what the likes of me do. We do it all over the world.’

Young though he was, The Ghost knew how it worked. The rich purchased commissions so they could rise quickly through the ranks of the British army, ensuring that for the most part they stayed out of the bloodiest fighting and enjoyed the best comforts. ‘It doesn’t need to be that way,’ he said.

‘It does, lad. When you’re as wise in the ways of the world as you are in combat – and by Christ you’re wise in that – then you’ll know.’

The Ghost shook his head. Time was wasting. ‘It doesn’t matter, sir. Either way, it’s not you I want, it’s who you serve.’

‘Still can’t do it, son,’ said the bodyguard sadly. ‘I can’t let you do it.’ The cutlass was raised, he kept his opponent on point and his stance remained firm, but there was something in his eyes The Ghost recognized. A look of impending defeat. The look of a man who knows he’s beaten, whose death or downfall is not a matter of *if*, but *when*.

‘You have no choice,’ The Ghost replied, and was already in motion, and to the bodyguard he was a mere blur, as though the night had rippled, the darkness shifting to accommodate the young Assassin’s sheer speed as he sprang forward.

The Ghost had not made the mistake of underestimating his foe of course. He had anticipated how his opponent might defend, as well as factoring in that his opponent would expect him to attack a certain way. And so he feinted first one way and then the other, feeling the flow of his own body as he manipulated it in two different directions at once as he leapt, using a gravestone as a springboard to come at the bodyguard from an unexpected height and angle.

Too good, too fast, and much too combat-intelligent for the bodyguard. This man, trained no doubt by the English military, tough as old boots to begin with and toughened even more by countless overseas campaigns, even he was no match for The Ghost. No match at all. The cosh, sticky with blood from its last

victim, crashed into the back of his head and his jaw slackened and his eyes rolled as he fell unconscious to the ground.

An hour or so later he would awaken, with a sore head but otherwise unharmed, when he would need to answer searching questions as to how he and his three equally battle-hardened companions could possibly have been bested by a mere squit of a lad.

For now, though, he was out cold.

Meanwhile, The Ghost vaulted a gravestone, coming to the woman who had pulled herself up on her hands and now stared at him with a mixture of fear and awe and gratitude.

'Bloody hell, lad, what the bloody hell are you, some kind of demon or summat?'

'Go,' he told her. 'Leave this place before our friend gets his wits back about him.' And with that he took off after the two pleasure-seeking gentlemen, the sight of the woman's bruised, bloody and swollen face spurring him on, kindling his anger as he snatched up the cutlass and ran.

Catching them was easy. They were drunk and noisy and slow and though they were frightened they were probably confident that their champion could best this young upstart, because men like this had never needed to worry about anything. They employed people to do their dirty work; they had servants and lackeys to do their worrying for them.

So, yes, The Ghost caught them easily, and he reached the one who lagged behind, barrelling into him so that the besuited toff fell and The Ghost was on him in an instant, rolling him over and pinning him down with his knees on either side of the man's chest, raising the cutlass and channelling his fury, remembering as he went to deliver the killing blow that it was this man – *this very man* – who just moments ago he'd seen laughing as he kicked a defenceless woman half to death.

10

The time had come for Ethan to leave Amritsar, but there was something troubling him and he had called a meeting of the family, the outcome of which was to send shockwaves through the Mir family.

At this meeting Arbaaz had been expecting Ethan to announce that Jayadeep was ready to embark upon the next stage of his education – in the field.

However …

'I don't think he's ready,' said Ethan bluntly without ceremony or warning.

Arbaaz broke bread and smiled. 'Then you cannot leave, Ethan. That was our agreement.'

The two men had shared great adventures. They talked of the Koh-i-Noor diamond. How Arbaaz had retrieved it. Sometimes Jayadeep's mother would be present and all three would reminisce. Names like Alexander Burnes and William Sleeman meant nothing to Jayadeep, but to his parents they were a doorway to another world of exciting memories.

'I've already sent word. They expect me home and I intend to honour the commitment I've made to them. I will return, Arbaaz, of that you can be sure.'

'Then I fail to understand. Our agreement was that you should train Jayadeep until he was ready for the field.'

The boy had sat beside his mother feeling invisible as they discussed him without acknowledging his presence. It wasn't exactly an unknown occurrence; the more important the issue, the less likely he was to have a say. He had never been consulted on his future, nor would he expect to be; it was simply a matter of fact that until further notice he had no say in matters involving his own destiny.

'You're going to have to enlighten me, my old friend,' said Arbaaz. 'Throughout your years here you have assured me that Jayadeep is one of the most talented young Assassins you have ever encountered, which we all know means you think Jayadeep is *the* most talented Assassin you have ever encountered. And why not! He was tutored first by me and then by your good self. I've seen for myself that he has no lack of skill, and unless you've been honey-coating my ears all this time, you think so too, and yet now, on the eve of

your departure, comes this news the boy isn't ready. You must excuse my confusion. In what way is this highly trained, consummately skilled boy whose mentor is about to embark for home *not ready*? And more to the point, *why*?'

A note of angry irritation was evident in his father's voice, which had risen as he delivered his speech. Even a breadcrumb clinging obstinately to his bottom lip did nothing to diminish his formidable look. Jayadeep shrank back. Even his mother appeared concerned.

Only Ethan was unperturbed, returning Arbaaz's daunting stare with an unfathomable gaze of his own.

'It's true that the boy has astonishing natural skill. It's true that I have been able to mould that natural talent into Assassinship of a greater-than-usual standard. For my own part, I have learnt much from the boy, which is partly the reason I intend to leave for home and have no intention of deviating from that path, no matter how many breadcrumbs you spit at me, old friend.'

Arbaaz, abashed, wiped his mouth and when his hand came away it revealed the very beginnings of a smile. 'So why then?' he asked. No, *demanded*. 'Why leave us at this crucial time, when there is still so much to teach the boy?'

Ethan's smile wasn't so much a smile as a look of kindness and concern that reached his lips as well as his eyes. A look that he passed first to the parents and then to the boy.

'He lacks the killer instinct. The boy can kill and no doubt will, but he lacks something we have, you and I, or perhaps he has something we lack.'

Arbaaz tilted his chin, colour rising. 'Are you saying my boy's a coward?'

'Oh for God's sake, Arbaaz,' huffed an exasperated Ethan. 'No, of course I'm bloody not. It's a matter of disposition. If you put this boy in the field, he will either fail or …'

'I won't,' said Jayadeep suddenly, surprising even himself, anticipating a scolding, maybe even a more painful punishment for this sudden unwarranted and uninvited outburst.

Instead his father looked proudly at him, reaching over to squeeze his shoulder in a gesture that made Jayadeep's heart swell with pride.

Ethan ignored him. He had turned his attention to Pyara. 'There is no shame in this,' he told her, and he could see the softness in her eyes, the secret hope that maybe just maybe her family might at long last be free of bloodshed. 'He can serve the Brotherhood in other ways. What a mentor he will be. A master tactician. A policymaker. A great leader. And somebody has to be these things. Jayadeep can be these things. Just not … *never* … a warrior.'

Arbaaz could contain himself no longer. Pyara, calm and resolute, accustomed to the sight of her husband in full flight, remained implacable as he exploded

with rage. ‘Jayadeep, my son, *will* be a great warrior, Frye. He will be a master Assassin, a mentor of the Indian Brotherhood …’

‘He can still …’

‘Not unless he has proven himself in combat. As a warrior. As an Assassin.’

Ethan shook his head. ‘He is not ready and, Arbaaz, I’m sorry if it breaks your heart but in my opinion he never will be.’

‘Ah,’ said Arbaaz, rising and shepherding Jayadeep. Pyara surreptitiously wiped a tear from her eye as she too stood, loyal, despite her torn emotions. ‘There we have it, Ethan. It is just your opinion. What do you think, Jay, shall we prove our English friend wrong?’

And Jayadeep, the boy who would one day be The Ghost, was not even ten years old but who so desperately wanted to please Arbaaz because his father was his king, said, ‘Yes, Father.’

11

Text of a letter from Ethan Frye to Arbaaz Mir, decoded from the original:

Dear Arbaaz,

Six years have passed since I left India to return home here to England. Six years since we last spoke, my old friend. And far, far too long.

In the meantime I have learnt to mourn the loss of my beloved wife, Cecily, and do so in a manner of which she would have approved, which is to say that I have set aside my former resentment in order to build a relationship with our two children, Evie and Jacob. I regret that I ever considered them responsible for my loss; I have done my best to make reparations for the lost years of their childhood.

It was the years spent with your extraordinary son, Jayadeep, that galvanized me, and for that I am eternally grateful to you both. Jayadeep set me on a path of enlightenment that made me re-evaluate my thinking. I'm sorry to say, Arbaaz, that it has only strengthened my resolve regarding the matter that drove a wedge between us all those years ago, and now prompts me to make contact once again.

I should explain. As Assassins we are instilled with a certain philosophy. Unlike the Templars who divide the world's inhabitants into shepherds and sheep, we see millions of bright spots: intelligent, feeling beings, each with their own potential and capable of working within a greater whole.

Or so we like to think. These days I wonder. Do we always put this philosophy into practice? When we train our young Assassins we put swords into their hands when they have only just learnt to walk. We teach values passed down the generations, sculpting the child into a creature of preconception and discrimination and, above all, in our particular case, a killer.

What we are doing is right. Please don't read into this an expression of ideological doubt on my behalf, for I have never been more firm in my beliefs that the Brotherhood stands for what is right in this world. My doubt, dear Arbaaz, lies in the application of that ideology, and this doubt is what keeps me awake at night, wondering if we fail our children by moulding them into our image, when, in fact, we should be teaching them to follow a path of their own. I wonder, are we merely paying lip service to the very principles we espouse?

With my own children I have attempted to take an alternative path to the one I have always followed in the past, and different to the one I tried to follow with Jayadeep. Rather than indoctrinating them, I have instead strived to give them the tools with which to teach themselves.

It pleases me that their trajectory follows my own. As you know, in London, the Assassin presence is long since depleted. Our Brotherhood is weak here, while the Templars, under the command of their Grand Master, Crawford Starrick, continue to thrive; indeed, news has reached us that our enemy's infiltration into the city's elite is even more pronounced than we feared. They have plans afoot, of that there is no doubt. Big plans. And one day, when they are ready, Jacob and Evie will join the struggle against them.

When they are ready. *Note that well, Arbaaz. I allowed them to find their own path, and I have abided by the principle that they should only call themselves fully fledged Assassins when I know them to be as mentally capable of fulfilling the task as they are physically. I do this in the*

knowledge that we are all individuals, some of us suited to one direction, some to another. Assassins we may be in name, yet not all of us can be 'assassins' in nature.

And so it is with Jayadeep. I understand how heartbreaking it must be for you. He is, after all, your son. You yourself are a great Assassin and he has the potential to be one. However, what I know for sure is that though he may be skilled and talented in the means of dealing death, Jayadeep lacks the heart to do so.

He will kill. Yes, he will kill, if needs be. In a heartbeat if it were in defence of himself or of those he loves. But I wonder, will he do so in the name of an ideology? Will he do so for the creed?

Will he do so in cold blood?

Which brings me to the timing of my letter. The troubling news has reached me that Jayadeep is to embark upon his first real-world assignment. An assassination.

Firstly, I must say how much I appreciate that you took my concerns of six years ago seriously enough to delay his blooding until after his seventeenth birthday. For this I am grateful, and commend you for your wisdom and restraint. However, it is my view that Jayadeep lacks the core resolve needed for such an act – and nor will he ever attain it.

Simply put, he is different to you and me. Perhaps different to Jacob and Evie. Further, it is my belief – and a belief that is entirely consistent with the core values of the Brotherhood – that we should embrace what is different about him. We should celebrate that individuality and turn it to good use for the Brotherhood, rather than try to deny it and mould it into rough and awkward shapes.

To put it another way, by sending Jayadeep into action, you are inviting something far worse than your (imagined, if I may say so) disgrace that your son cannot follow in your own esteemed footsteps, in favour of a much, much more profound disgrace: abject failure.

I beg of you, please, retire him from this assignation, take a fresh view of him, utilize the best of your extraordinary son's abilities for the good of the Brotherhood rather than depending on the worst.

I hope to hear your decision by return, and I pray that you show the same wisdom and restraint for which I have already commended you. You have trusted me in the past; please, Arbaaz, trust me again.

Yours, as ever,
Ethan Frye
London

12

Letter to Ethan Frye from Arbaaz Mir, decoded from the original:

Ethan, I thank you for your correspondence. However, I regret that you chose to build bridges over such turbulent waters. There is no debate to be had regarding Jayadeep's abilities as an Assassin. You gave him the skills, I in the interim have provided him with the moral fibre necessary to put them into practice. You're fond of putting things simply, Ethan, so I shall do so now: it is six long years since you last saw Jayadeep and you are no longer in a position to make judgements concerning his suitability as an Assassin. He has changed, Ethan. He has developed and grown. I am confident he is ready for his blooding, and he will indeed carry out the assassination as planned. His target is a low-ranking Templar whose termination is a necessity in order to warn our enemies that their increased presence in India shall not be tolerated. I apologize if these next words appeared to be a jibe against you and George Westhouse in London, Ethan, but we are keen that the Templars should not gain a foothold here as they did in London, for we know where that leads.

I thank you for your correspondence, Ethan. I hope and trust that the foundations of our relationship are secure enough that this need not be the end of a great friendship for you and me. However, I have made my decision, and just as you abide by your own principles, I must abide by mine.

Yours, as ever,
Arbaaz Mir
Amritsar

13

Internal dispatch sent to George Westhouse of London, decoded from the original:

Please relay immediately to Ethan Frye: Jayadeep Mir in The Darkness.

14

The door closed behind them. Torches bolted to the walls lit stone steps down to a second door.

Ahead of Ethan was the meeting-room custodian, Ajay. Like Ethan, his cowl covered his head as though to acknowledge the grim nature of their business here in this dark, cold and unforgiving place. In addition, Ajay wore a curved sword at his belt and Ethan had caught a glimpse of his hidden blade as he opened the door. Yes, Ajay would do his duty if needs be. With regret, for sure, but he would do it.

They called this place The Darkness. A series of small chambers beneath Amritsar's main Brotherhood meeting room. Nominally the rooms were designated for document storage or as an armoury, but their crepuscular atmosphere and cell-like design ensured rumours constantly swirled around about what might have taken place there in the past: plots hatched, enemies interrogated. It was even said that a baby had been born in The Darkness, though few gave the story much credibility.

Today, however, The Darkness would earn its reputation. Today The Darkness had a guest.

Ajay led Ethan through a second fortified door and into a dimly lit stone corridor beyond, doors lining either side. At the passage end, he unlocked a door inset with nothing but a tiny viewing hole, then stood to one side, bowing slightly to allow his visitor inside. Ethan stepped over the threshold into a small chamber that, whatever its previous function, had been repurposed as a cell, complete with a wooden cot.

Out of respect for Ethan, Ajay laid his lantern at the Assassin's feet before withdrawing and closing the door behind him. And then, as light glowed on the forbidding dark stone of the room, Ethan gazed upon his former pupil for the first time in over six years, and his heart broke afresh to see him laid so low.

Jayadeep sat cross-legged in a corner among the dirty straw that covered the cell floor. He'd been here for weeks, while Ethan had made the lengthy crossing from England to India. As a result, his new living quarters were none too fresh and he'd no doubt been in better health too, but even so Ethan was struck by the

boy's looks. In the intervening years he had matured into a handsome young man, with intense, piercing eyes, dark hair that he would occasionally reach to brush from his eyes, and flawless chestnut-coloured skin. *He'll break some hearts*, thought Ethan, gazing at him from the doorway.

First things first, though.

The Assassin put a fist to his nose and mouth, as much to replace the stink of the cell with the familiar scent of his own skin as to register his dismay at his former pupil's predicament. The possibility that he himself could have done more to prevent the situation sharpened his regret, and the look in Jayadeep's eyes as he turned his gaze from contemplating his lap to finding his old tutor in the doorway, a penetrating, heart-wrenching stare of gratitude, relief, sorrow and shame, only sharpened it further.

'Hello, master,' said Jayadeep simply.

It wasn't particularly pleasant, but Ethan took a seat beside Jayadeep, the two men together again, circumstances so different this time, the smell of jasmine a memory of an ancient and now unattainable past.

Ethan reached a hand to pluck at the rags Jayadeep wore. 'They stripped you of your robes then?'

Jayadeep gave a rueful look. 'There's a little more to it than that.'

'In that case, how about we start with you telling me what happened?'

The boy gave a short, sad snort. 'You mean you don't already know?'

Ethan had arrived in Amritsar to find the Brotherhood in mild disarray, a more than usually visible presence as they worked to nullify the repercussions of what had taken place. So, yes, of course he knew the story. But even so …

'I'd like to hear it from the horse's mouth, as it were.'

'It's difficult for me to talk about.'

'Please try.'

Jayadeep sighed. 'Your training had shaped my mind and body into a series of responses and reactions, into combinations of attack and defence, calculations, forecast and prognostication. I was ready to go into action in all but one respect. You were right, master, I lacked the heart. Tell me, how did you know?'

Ethan said, 'If I were to say to you that it all came down to the difference between a wooden training kukri and the real thing, would you believe me?'

'I would think it was part of the story. But just part.'

'You would be right, Jayadeep. For the truth is that I saw in your eyes something I have seen in the eyes of men I killed; men whose very own lack of heart in combat was a weakness I recognized and exploited in order to plunge my blade into them.'

'And you thought you saw it in me?'

‘I did. And I was right, wasn’t I?’

‘We thought you were wrong. Father believed I could be instilled with the mettle needed to be a killer. He set about showing me the way. We practised and rehearsed with live subjects.’

‘Putting an animal to the sword is very different to –’

‘I know that now.’ The words came out sharply. A little of the old master–pupil interaction returned and Jayadeep lowered fearful eyes in apology. ‘I know that now, master, and believe me I regret it.’

‘But you and Arbaaz felt that you were ready to take the life of one of your own species, to take from a man everything he ever was and everything he ever will be, to leave his family grieving, to begin a wave of sadness and sorrow and possible revenge and recrimination that might ripple throughout the ages? You and your father felt you were ready for that?’

‘Please, master, don’t make this more difficult for me. Yes, you are right, in the face of what you say, our preparations might seem dreadfully feeble, but then again, what Assassin can claim differently? Everything is theory until it is put into practice. And my turn came to put theory into practice. For my blooding I was to kill an Indian Templar by the name of Tjinder Dani. A man we believed was making plans to establish a Templar outpost in the city.’

‘And what was to be the method of his execution?’

‘The garrotte.’

Inwardly Ethan cursed. A garrotte. Of all things. You didn’t need a huge amount of skill to use a garrotte, but you needed resolve, and what Jayadeep had was plenty of skill but not so much resolve. What the hell had Arbaaz been thinking?

Jayadeep continued. ‘Under cover of darkness, myself and Father rode out to the street where Dani kept his lodgings. One of our agents had bribed a nightwatchman for the key, and in the street we took possession of it, thanked and paid the man and sent him on his way.’

A witness, thought Ethan. It gets better.

‘I know what you’re thinking. I could have picked the lock.’

‘You are an excellent lock-pick.’

‘The information given to us by the agent was that the Templar Dani was expecting an attack and thus was accompanied by bodyguards during the day. Our enemies were relying on the fact that a daytime attempt on his life would have resulted in a public confrontation. A street skirmish involving multiple Assassins and Templars was to be avoided at all costs. For that reason it was decided to make a night-time incursion, and for that reason we assembled as much information as possible regarding the target’s nocturnal activities.’

‘And it was you who did this, was it?’

‘Yes, and I learnt that Dani barred his door and laid traps at night, that an invasion either by the door or the window would result in alarms being activated. So, you see, the key given to us was not to the door of Dani’s room, not even to his lodgings, but to the warehouse next door, where I was able to make an unobtrusive entrance. There were three men stationed in the street, looking for all the world as though they were providing security for the warehouse, but I knew them to be Templar guards, and their job was to see to it that no Assassin scaled the walls of either the lodging house or the warehouse. It was clever. They had the outside of the buildings covered while inside Dani had his room secure. It would take a measure of stealth and guile to get inside. I have both.

‘I waited in the shadows, taking strength and reassurance from the knowledge that not far away my father waited with our horses, ready for our escape. At the same time I measured the movements of the guards as they carried out their patrol.

‘I had been there on previous nights, of course, timing just as I was on this occasion, and what I’d learnt was that the guards coordinated their movements to prevent anyone having the opportunity to scale the walls. Under their robes they carried crossbows and throwing knives; they kept a safe distance from one another so as to prevent a quick double-kill, so taking out one of them would alert the others. I had no reason to suspect that they were anything but supremely competent. That is why I had the key, Ethan.’

‘The key was to the warehouse?’

‘Yes. I had greased the keyhole myself that very morning, and now I counted, I timed, and I made my move when the moment was right. I streaked across the apron behind the warehouse and to the rear door, where I thrust the key into the lock. The sound was muffled, a well-oiled click that, even though it sounded to my ears like a gunshot, was in reality just another indistinguishable night noise, and then I was inside. I locked the warehouse door behind me but took the key. This was to be my escape route also.

‘Or so I thought at the time. But of course I was wrong about that.’

The boy’s head dropped once more to his lap and he wrung his hands, tortured by the pain of the wretched memory.

‘The warehouse was empty. All I saw on the stone floor was a long slatted table and some chairs. Possibly it was to have been used by the Templars for some reason. In either case the idea of it needing an exterior guard was laughable. Of course they hadn’t bothered to post a guard inside, but even so I stayed silent as I made my way up steps and then ladders to the roof of the building. Once outside, I stayed in the shadows and took my neckerchief from

round my neck. You ask about my Assassin's robes, but, in fact, I never wore them. I was wearing then what I'm wearing now. If by some chance I'd been discovered by the warehouse guards, they would have taken me for a street boy of no consequence, given me a slap and sent me on my way. Had they investigated more thoroughly they would have known that I differed from a street urchin in only one respect – that I had in my pocket a coin.'

Ethan was nodding sagely. He knew the weapon. The coin is wrapped in the neckerchief, the neckerchief used as a *lumal*, a kind of garrotte. The coin chokes the victim's windpipe, crushing his larynx, hastening death and preventing him from crying out. It is one of the most basic but effective of the Assassin's tools. Ethan began to understand why Arbaaz had selected it. He even began to understand why Arbaaz had chosen Jayadeep for the job. 'Continue,' he said.

'I made the jump easily. And then, staying in the shadows of the lodging-house roof and wary of the guards who still patrolled below, I crept towards the hatch I knew to be in the ceiling of Dani's room. I had brought grease with me, a dab of it behind my ear, and I used it on the hatch, which I opened as carefully as possible, before letting myself down into the dark space below.

'My breath was held and my heart hammered. But as you had always taught me, the presence of a little fear is to be welcomed. Fear makes us careful. Fear keeps us alive. There was nothing so far about my mission to give me cause for worry. Everything was going to plan.

'Now I was in Dani's room. I could see the traps he had placed at his door and at the window. A pulley system attached to a ceiling bell that hung not far from the hatch I had just used to make my grand entrance.

'And there in bed was my target, a man about whom I had learnt a great deal in the weeks leading up to the assignment. My breathing became heavy. My temple seemed to throb as though the vein there was beating in time to my increased heart rate. This was my nerves worsening –'

Ethan stopped him. 'While you were learning about Dani he was also becoming a human being in your eyes, wasn't he? You had begun to think of him as a person rather than as a target, hadn't you?'

'In retrospect, you're right. I had.'

'Who could have seen that coming?' said Ethan, regretting his inappropriate sarcasm immediately.

'Perhaps it would have been too late, even if I had. Too late for second thoughts, I mean. There was no going back. I was an Assassin in the room of a slumbering man. My target. I had to act. I had no choice but to go through with the job. The issue of whether or not I was ready had ceased to be relevant. It was not a question of being ready, it was a question of action. Of kill or fail.'

‘And looking around, I think we all know what happened there.’ Again, Ethan regretted his flippancy, remembering that when this conversation was over he would pull himself to his feet, brush the straw from his backside, call for the custodian and leave the boy alone in this dark and damp place. No, this was no time for smart remarks. Instead, he tried to imagine the scene in the room: the darkened lodging house, a man asleep – did a man ever look so innocent as when he was asleep? – and Jayadeep, his breath held, wringing his neckerchief in his hand as he gathered his nerves ready to strike, the coin rolled into the neckerchief, and …

The coin falling from the neckerchief. Striking the floorboards.

‘Your garrotte,’ he said to Jayadeep. ‘Did the coin fall from it?’

‘How did you know? I didn’t tell anybody that.’

‘Visualization, my dear boy. Haven’t I always taught you about it?’

Across the boy’s face came the first hint of a smile since Ethan had entered the room. ‘You did. Of course you did. It’s a technique I use constantly.’

‘But not on this occasion?’

A cloud of sadness stole the smile’s slight beginnings. ‘No, not on this occasion. On this occasion all I heard was the blood rushing in my head. All I could hear was my father’s voice urging me on to do what had to be done. When the coin dropped the noise surprised me and it woke Dani and he was quicker to react than I was.’

‘You should have struck the moment you were in the room,’ said Ethan, and an anger that didn’t really belong with the boy was directed at him anyway. ‘You should have struck the second you had the chance. Your hesitation was your undoing. What did I always tell you? What did your father always advise? You hesitate, you die – it’s as simple as that. An assassination is not a cerebral act. It requires great thought, but all of that thought goes into the planning and preparation, the contemplation and visualization prior to the act itself. *That* is the time for second, third, fourth thoughts, as many thoughts as you need until you are sure – absolutely certain – that you are ready to do what needs to be done. Because when you are in the moment, when you stand before your target, there is no time for hesitation.’

Jayadeep’s eyes swam with tears as he looked up at his old friend. ‘I know that now.’

Ethan laid a comforting hand on his. ‘I know. I’m sorry. Tell me what happened next.’

‘He was quick, I’ll give him that, and I should credit him with a lot more besides, because he was quick and he was strong, and he sprang from the bed

with a speed that surprised me in a man of his age and size and he caught me, by now practically unarmed, and thrust me backwards to the window.

‘We went straight through it, Dani and I. We went straight through the shutters and plummeted to the cobbles below, a fall that was thankfully broken by the canopy beneath. Looking back, perhaps I hoped that my training might return to me, a kind of instinct, if you like. But it failed me. Even as I rolled away from Dani, hurt and stunned and desperately trying to get a hold of my senses, I saw faces appear at the windows on the other side of the street, and heard the sound of the running feet as the guards hastened towards us.

‘I rolled away from Dani, feeling a blinding pain in my head and another in my hip. The next moment he was upon me, his teeth bared, his eyes bright and wide with hatred, his hands fixed round my neck.

‘He never heard the horse. Neither did I. Earlier we had used strips of blanket to muffle the hooves, Father and I, and he came riding over the stone towards us, silent as a wraith, and the first I saw of him was a robed figure on horseback looming behind Dani, one hand on the reins of the horse, the other held out, crooked at the elbow and flexing, his hidden blade ejecting, moonlight running along the steel. Father wrapped the reins in his hand and wrenched back, forcing his horse to rear up on its hind legs, and for a second I saw him as the fearsome Assassin-warrior of legend. I saw the death-dealing glint in his eye, his intent to kill as strong and true as the weapon he wielded. I saw a man I could never hope to be. Perhaps I knew then that I was lost.

‘And perhaps, also, Dani, my intended victim, knew that death had come from behind. But it was too late, and my father’s blade punched through the top of his skull and into his brain, killing him instantly – an instant in which his eyes widened then rolled back and his mouth dropped open in surprise and a half-second of excruciating agony before his life was extinguished – an instant during which I saw the blood-streaked steel inside his mouth.

‘Father withdrew his blade and droplets of blood flew from it as he swept it back, this time to slice the throat of the first oncoming guard who fell into a mist of arterial spray, his sword not even drawn. Father’s arm swept back the other way, this time across his chest and there was a ring of steel, as sharp and loud in the night as Dani’s warning bell as his blade met the sword of the second guard. His parry sent the attacker staggering back, and in a blink Father was off his horse to claim his advantage, drawing his sword with his other hand and attacking at the same time.

‘It was over in a heartbeat. In a blur of robes and steel, Father attacked with both weapons. Instinctively the guard had straightened his forearm to defend against the sword attack but it left him exposed to a strike from the other side

and that's exactly what Father did, slamming his hidden blade into the guard's armpit.

'The man fell, his tunic already crimson, the cobbles gleaming with it. He would bleed out in moments. Either that or choke on his own blood if …'

'If the blade punctured his lungs. Yes, I taught you that myself.'

'Whether more guards were simply slow in arriving or had witnessed my father in action and decided that discretion was the better part of valour, I don't know. Without a word he regained his horse, reached for me and swept me up to ride behind him, and then we were gone, leaving the street in pandemonium behind us.'

There was a long pause. Ethan said nothing, feeling the boy's trauma almost as if it were his own. So that was it, he thought. Jayadeep's action had broken the tenets of the creed: he had been forced to surrender hiding in plain sight; worse, he had been forced to compromise the Brotherhood.

'I know what you're thinking,' said Jayadeep at last. 'You're thinking I'm a coward.'

'Well, then you don't know what I'm thinking, because that's not what I'm thinking. There's a world of difference between thought and action, and one thing I know of you, Jayadeep, is that you're not a coward.'

'Then why was I unable to deliver the killing blow?'

Ethan rolled his eyes. Had nobody listened to a bloody word he'd said? 'Because you're not a killer.'

Again came silence. Sorrow bloomed from the boy and Ethan thought, *What a world we live in, when we mourn an inability to kill*.

'What did your father say to you, on the journey home?'

'Nothing, master. He said nothing, not a word. But of course his silence spoke volumes, and has continued to do so. He has not been to see me. Nor Mother.'

Ethan fumed. The bloody tyrant, leaving his own son in this hole. 'The Assassins will have forbidden your mother from coming to see you.'

'Yes.'

And Ethan could well imagine how Arbaaz had been feeling. He could picture it as he and his son rode home, dropping off Jayadeep, packed off to his quarters in silent disgrace, then riding off to see the mentor, Hamid. The boy went on to tell him that he had been asleep in bed when he was awoken by a black hood over his head, and had been bundled away to The Darkness. Ethan wondered whether Arbaaz was one of the men who had taken Jayadeep into custody. Had his own father led the arrest party?

He stood. 'I will be doing my best to get you out of here, Jayadeep, of that you may be certain.'

But as he called for Ajay, in English and in Hindi, what stayed with Ethan was the look in the boy's eyes as he shook his head in sad denial of hope.

Ethan and Ajay made the short journey along the passage and up the stone steps to the meeting room above. There was a second guard, a striking-looking woman who stood with her feet planted slightly apart and her hands on the hilt of a large sword, its point on the flagstone at her feet. She regarded Ethan implacably from beneath her cowl.

'This is Kulpreet,' said Ajay by way of introduction. He tilted a stubbled jaw in her direction. 'She is the best with a sword in the Brotherhood.'

And yet the sword she minded was longer, had a flatter blade …

'When?' Ethan asked her.

'Tomorrow morning,' she replied.

And Ethan could see from her eyes that he was talking to Jayadeep's executioner.

15

‘I thank you for seeing me.’

Ethan had every reason to fear that Arbaaz might simply refuse his request for an audience. What had happened wasn’t Ethan’s fault – far from it – but in Arbaaz’s eyes he must have been held at least partly responsible. Then, of course, there was the small matter of the exchange of letters.

Not that he would have taken no for an answer. He was here to save the life of Jayadeep Mir, and he wasn’t leaving until the job was done.

Sure enough, his old friend regarded him warily, with eyes that were tired from worry and sleeplessness, face pinched and drawn. What must he have been going through? What agonies of torn loyalty, parental love and duty to the Brotherhood?

His worries had evidently relieved him of his obligations as a host. There was no offer of bread or olives or wine for Ethan, and certainly no warm greeting. The Assassin had been led through the cool marble corridors of the Mir household, disappointed not to catch sight of Pyara – he may have had an ally there – and then deposited in one of the back offices, a room he himself had once used for tutoring Jayadeep. Back then he’d chosen the room because of its spartan furniture and decoration. No distractions. Today, there wasn’t even hot tea. Just a simple woven wall covering, two straight-backed chairs where they sat, an unpolished table between them and an unmistakable atmosphere.

‘Don’t misinterpret my reasons for agreeing to see you, Ethan. I have something I need to ask you.’

Wary, hoping he might have had a chance to state his case, Ethan spread his hands. ‘Go on.’

‘I want to know, Ethan, how you intend to do it?’

‘How do I intend to do what?’

‘Free Jayadeep, of course. Do you plan to break him out of The Darkness or perhaps rescue him from the execution itself? How many Assassins’ lives do you plan to take in the process?’

The gaze of Arbaaz was flat and terrible.

‘I had rather hoped to talk to you about it first, Arbaaz, as one of my oldest and dearest friends.’

Arbaaz shook his head. ‘No. There is to be no discussion. And what’s more I must tell you that you will be under surveillance for the duration of what I hope is a short stay in Amritsar. The reason you are under surveillance is to ensure you don’t try to free Jayadeep.’

‘Why might I want to free Jayadeep, Arbaaz?’ asked Ethan softly, a reasonable tone in his voice.

The other man picked at a knot in the wood with his fingernail, regarding it as though he expected it to do something. ‘Because your life in the West has made you soft, Ethan. It’s why the Brotherhood in London is practically wiped out, and why you and George are mere insurgents compared to the Templar stranglehold.

‘You’re weak, Ethan. You have allowed your Brotherhood over the water to deteriorate to the point of irrelevancy and now you want to bring your progressive policies over here and you think I’ll let you.’

Ethan leaned forward. ‘Arbaaz, this is not about Templar versus Assassin. This is about Jayadeep.’

Arbaaz’s eyes slid away, clouding for just a moment. ‘Even more reason that he should pay the ultimate price for his …’

‘What?’

‘Misconduct.’ Arbaaz’s voice rose. ‘His misconduct, his incompetence, his negligence.’

‘He needn’t be executed.’

‘You see? You have come to plead for his life.’

Ethan shrugged. ‘I make no bones about it. I do come to plead for his life, but you misjudge me if you think me weak, or that I disapprove of the hard line you take. Quite the opposite, I admire your inner strength and resolve. This is, after all, your son we’re talking about. I know of no Assassin forced into such a difficult position as the one you find yourself in now, forced to put duty before family.’

Arbaaz gave him a sharp sideways look, as though unsure what to read into Ethan’s words. Seeing his old friend was genuine, his face folded. ‘I lose a son and wife too,’ he said in a voice that drowned in misery. ‘Pyara will never look at me again. She has made that perfectly clear.’

‘You need not make that sacrifice.’

‘How so?’

‘Banish him – banish him into my custody where I have an important job for him, one that, if it is successful, may help to restore the Brotherhood in London.

An operation, Arbaaz, a covert operation for which Jayadeep, with his particular talents, is ideally suited. He need not die. Do you see? He can return to England with me and your honour will be satisfied. Suitable judgement will have been passed upon him, but he will live, Arbaaz. Not in the comfort to which he is accustomed, I grant you. What I have in mind involves extraordinarily reduced circumstances. But perhaps you will consider that part of his punishment. And after all, you needn't tell that to Pyara. Simply that he is with me. I will be his handler.'

Praying for the right outcome, Ethan watched indecision flit across the other's face.

'I would need to talk to Hamid,' said Arbaaz thoughtfully.

'You would,' said Ethan, and suppressed a burst of relief. Arbaaz had no desire to see Jayadeep put to the sword; Ethan was offering him a way out of a situation that would have torn his family apart, and all with no loss of face. 'What's more, I think you will find that conversation an easier one than you might imagine,' continued Ethan. 'I saw Ajay and Kulpreet today, and if their mood is representative of the Brotherhood as a whole, then they no more wish to see Jayadeep executed than you or I. Let the punishment be exile. There are many who consider it even worse than death.'

'No,' said Arbaaz.

Ethan started. 'I beg your pardon?'

'The punishment must be death.'

'I don't understand …'

'If this assignation is as undercover as you suggest, then wouldn't it be advantageous if the agent did not exist? Who can link him to Jayadeep Mir if Jayadeep Mir is dead?'

Ethan clapped his hands. 'A ghost?' he said happily. 'That's a stroke of genius, Arbaaz, worthy of the great Assassin I know.'

Arbaaz stood then, came round the table and finally took his old friend in an embrace. 'Thank you, Ethan,' he said as the Assassin stumbled clumsily to his feet. 'Thank you for what you are doing.'

And Ethan left, thinking that, all in all, it had been a good afternoon's work. He had not had to use the letter in his pocket, the one in which Arbaaz had explicitly rejected Ethan's advice, a letter that proved that any charges of incompetence or negligence lay not with Jayadeep but with his father. What's more, he had saved the life of a boy who was as close to his heart as his own two children, and quite possibly saved the marriage of Arbaaz and Pyara into the bargain.

Also, he had an agent, and not just any agent. The most promising Assassin it had ever been his fortune to train.

16

Two years later Jayadeep, now The Ghost in name and deed, kneeled astride the upper-class pleasure-seeker in the churchyard at Marylebone and raised the short sword ready to deliver the death blow.

And then, just as he had on the night of his blooding, he froze.

His mind went back to Dani and the blood-streaked dull gleam of his father's blade inside the dying man's mouth, and he saw again the light blink out in Dani's eyes and knew he had watched death: fast and brutal and delivered remorselessly. And he could not bring himself to do it.

The toff saw his chance. The man had never fought a fair fight in his life. Any military service would have been spent toasting his good fortune in the officers' mess while the lower orders went out to die in the name of his queen. But, like any other living being, he had an instinct for living, and it told him that his attacker's moment of hesitation was his best chance to survive.

He bucked and writhed. He thrust his hips with such sudden, desperate strength that it reminded The Ghost briefly of being back at home, taming wild ponies. Then he found himself thrown to the side, still dazed, but with his mind sent in a turmoil by this latest failure of nerve. The sword tumbled from his fingers and the toff made a dive for it, a cry of triumph escaping his lips at the same time. 'Aha!' And then the toff swung about, ready to use the blade on The Ghost, and as amazed by the sudden favourable turn of events as he was enthusiastic to take advantage of them. 'You little bastard,' he spat as he lunged forward, arms straight, the point of the sword aimed for The Ghost's throat.

It never got there. From their left came a cry and the night tore open to reveal the woman, her long grey hair flying as she came shrieking from the darkness and barrelled into the toff with all her might.

As attacks went, it wasn't pretty. It wasn't even decisive. But it was devastatingly effective and with a shout of surprise and pain, the high-class yobbo was sent tumbling into the gravestones. He tried to raise the cutlass again but the woman was there first, jumping on his sword arm and breaking it with an audible snap and then using her other foot to stamp on his face so that for a second it looked as though she was dancing on a carpet of toff.

The man pulled away, snarling, his face a mask of fresh blood as he grabbed for the blade with his good arm and rose at the same time. Off-balance, the woman fell, and the tables were suddenly turned again, the sword about to have its say, but The Ghost had gathered his senses and he wasn't about to let him finish what he had started, and he struck, ramming the flat of his hand into the man's shoulder, his wounded arm, causing him to spin and scream in pain at the same time.

The scream was abruptly cut off as The Ghost delivered his second blow – the death strike – again with the heel of the hand but this time even harder and into the spot just below the toff's nose, breaking it and sending fragments of bone into the brain, killing him instantly.

There was a *clump* as the unlucky aristocrat hit his head on a gravestone on the way down and then came to rest on the untended grass. Dark runnels of blood and brain fluid trickled from his nostrils. His eyelids flickered as he died.

The Ghost stood, shoulders rising and falling to catch his breath. Sprawled by a nearby headstone the old woman watched him, and for a long moment the two of them regarded each other cautiously: this strange grey-haired old lady, thin-faced and weathered and bloody from the beating, and this strange young Indian man, filthy from his day's work at the dig. Both were clad in torn and dirty clothes. Both exhausted and bruised from battle.

'You saved my life,' he said presently. The Ghost spoke softly. His words seemed to evaporate in the silence and gloom of the graveyard, and the woman, feeling reassured that he wasn't a man on a killing spree and about to do her in with a final flourish of nocturnal bloodlust, pulled herself painfully up to rest on one arm.

'I was only able to save your life because you saved mine,' she said through broken teeth and raw and bloody lips.

He could tell she was badly injured. The way she held a hand to her side, she had probably broken a rib or two. The wrong movement and it might easily puncture a lung.

'Can you breathe all right?' He scrambled over the body of the toff to the grave marker where she lay and put gentle hands to her flank.

'Here,' she protested, suddenly flustered again, thinking maybe she might have been a bit premature in relaxing, 'what the bloody hell do you think you're doing?'

'I'm trying to help you,' he said distractedly, feeling for broken bones, then adding, 'You need to come with me.'

'Now, look here, you. Don't you be going and getting any ideas …'

‘What else do you suggest? We have a dead man here and three injured men back there, and somewhere is yet another man who’s either going to be looking for the constables or reinforcements or maybe both. And you’re injured. Stay here by all means, but I’d prefer it if you didn’t.’

She looked at him warily. ‘Well, where are you going to take me? Have you got a boarding house somewhere? You don’t look too prosperous.’

‘No,’ he said, ‘it’s not quite a boarding house.’

At this he gave a wry smile, and to the woman, whose name was Maggie, it was quite a sight to see, like the sun peeking through the clouds on an overcast day. She was in her sixties but perhaps because he had saved her life and perhaps because of that sun-and-moonlight smile, Maggie fell just a little bit under his spell, and she accompanied him to the tunnel that very night. From him she learnt his name was Bharat. That he worked as a labourer at those railway works up near Regents Park.

She rather took to life at the tunnel. At night she and The Ghost slept in an alcove back to back for warmth: together, but alone with their thoughts, and she never gave much consideration to the men who they had met that night. Two of them were too busy being fed by uncaring sanatorium staff to care, of course. But two of them were still out there. The last bodyguard. The surviving toff. They too had seen The Ghost in action. They too knew he was a most unusual young man.

17

When Abberline made a return trip to Belle Isle it was with the ridicule of his fellow bobbies still ringing in his ears.

Not so long ago they'd been calling him 'Fresh-faced Freddie' on account of his enthusiasm and tireless pursuit of justice, and on that score they were right: he had no wife or family; he was devoted to his job, and it was true that he did regard his colleagues as men who could always be depended upon to take the path of least resistance.

But what was it they were calling him now? 'The nobody bobby'. 'The cadaverless copper'. Or, with a slight alteration: 'the copper without a corpse'. None were witty or funny. In fact, as far as Abberline could tell, they consisted solely of an alliterative connection between one word for a dead body and another word for a law-enforcement officer. But even knowing that didn't help. It failed to alleviate the considerable pain of his colleagues' taunts, not to mention the fact that when all was said and done, they had a point. He had, after all, *lost* a body. And without a body there might as well have been no murder. Which meant …

He really wanted to find that body.

Which was why he found himself traipsing back to Belle Isle, without the benefit of a horse and cart this time, but a little wiser and more wary of any surprises the slum might have to offer. Over his shoulder was slung a sack. In it his secret weapon.

He went deeper into Belle Isle, where the stench from the factory and the slaughterhouse was almost overwhelming. Today the denizens of the rookery were hidden by a dense fog. Proper slum fog, it billowed and boomed threateningly, and within it danced flakes of soot as well as thicker, eddying clouds of lung-choking smoke. Devil's breath.

Every now and then Abberline would see shapes in the fog, and he began to get a sense of figures gathering, tracking his progress as he came deeper and deeper into this godforsaken land.

Good. That was just how he wanted it. He required an audience for what came next.

By now he was at the spot where the children had halted his cart and where, presumably, they had made the switch: his dead body for an equally lifeless pony.

He stopped. ‘Ahoy there,’ he called, catching himself by surprise, unsure what had compelled him to talk like a sailor. ‘You’ll remember me, no doubt. I’m the plum whose cadaver you stole.’

It was possible he imagined it, but even so – was that a *titter* he heard from within the veil of darkness?

‘I need to speak to the young lad who petted my horse the other day. See, it occurs to me that someone put you up to that caper. And I would dearly like to know who.’

The fog stayed silent. Its secrets safe.

‘Did he pay you?’ pressed Abberline. ‘Well, then I’ll pay you again …’ He jingled coins in his palm, the noise a soft, tinkling bell in the suffocating stillness.

There was a pause, and Abberline was about to unveil his secret weapon when at last came a reply, and a young disembodied voice said, ‘We’re scared of what he’ll do.’

‘I understand that,’ replied Abberline, peering into the murk in what he thought was the right direction. ‘He threatened you, no doubt. But I’m afraid you find yourselves in a location known as between a rock and a hard place, because if I leave here without the information I need, then I’ll be coming back, and I won’t be alone. I’ll be returning with one of them covered carts you see, the ones passing in and out of the workhouse gates …’ He paused for dramatic effect. ‘On the other hand, if I’m given the information I want then I’ll forget about the workhouse carts. I’ll leave this money behind, and what’s more …’

And now he hoisted the sack from over his shoulder, placed it on the ground and took a cricket bat and ball that he held up. ‘These as well. No more playing cricket with a kitten’s head, not when you get your hands on these little beauties. Cost a pretty penny, I can tell you – you won’t find a better set.’

The response came again, causing Abberline to jerk his head this way and that, feeling at a distinct disadvantage as he tried to pinpoint the source of the sound.

‘We’re frightened of what he’ll do,’ repeated the young voice. ‘He’s like a demon.’

Abberline felt his pulse quicken, knowing for sure he’d been right to suspect something out of the ordinary about this murder.

‘I’ve made my offer,’ he called back to his unseen intermediary. ‘On the one hand I have gifts. On the other I have dire consequences. And I can tell you this:

as well as returning with the workhouse carts, I'll put it about that I was given the information I needed anyway. The wrath of this demon – and he's not a demon, you know; he's a man, just like me – may well fall upon you anyway.'

He waited for the fog to make its decision.

At last it billowed and parted, and from it stepped the same boy who had stopped him the other day. Dirty face. Rags. A hollowed-out, hungry expression. This was a child whose appointment with the grave was surely imminent, and Abberline felt bad for the way he and others like him were used and abused. He felt bad for threatening them with the workhouse when threats and cold and hunger was all they knew.

'I mean you no harm. You have my word,' he said. He laid down the bat and ball on the ground between them.

The boy looked down at the cricket gear then back at the policeman. Abberline sensed the expectancy of the figures cloaked by the fog. 'You'll be angry we took your body,' the boy said with the reticence and caution of painful experience.

'I'm not best pleased you took my body, no, you're right about that,' conceded Abberline, 'But listen, I understand why you did it. And let me tell you this, if I were in your shoes right now, I would have done the exact same thing. I'm not here to judge you. I just want the truth.'

The boy took a step forward, more to acknowledge a growing trust of Abberline than for any other reason. 'There's not much more to say, sir. You was right. We was paid to distract you in your duties and trade the corpse for the pony. We wasn't told why, and nor did we ask. A handful of chink was what we got for delivering the body.'

'And the gun?'

'I didn't see no gun, sir.'

'It was in the dead man's pocket.'

'Then it stayed with him, sir.'

'And where did you deliver this body?'

The boy hung his head. Instead of answering he raised a hand to indicate where the horse slaughterers would have been, if not for the smog. 'Some of us saw the man go in there with it, and then not long later come out without it.'

'And what did he look like, this man?' asked Abberline, trying to keep the eagerness out of his voice, and failing miserably.

Not long later, the constable breathed a deep, grateful sigh of relief as he left the choking fog of Belle Isle behind and made his way back to the relatively clean air of his district. He was light some coins, a cricket bat and ball, but his

conscience was thankfully clean, and he had a description of this ‘demon’ whose motives were so much a mystery. It was a description that rang bells. He’d heard talk of a man dressed this way, this very particular – you might even say ‘idiosyncratic’ way – who had been involved in some ructions at the Rookery a week or so ago.

Abberline found his pace increasing as it all came back to him. There was a bobby in another district he could speak to, who might know something about this strange figure who should be easy to spot – a strange figure who wore robes and a cowl over his head.

18

Ethan never told The Ghost anything of his home life. The Ghost knew names of course – Cecily, Jacob, Evie – but nothing distinct, apart from the fact that the twins were close to him in age. ‘One day I hope to introduce you,’ Ethan had said, with a strange, unreadable expression. ‘But that won’t be until I’m certain they’re ready to join the fight.’

That was as much as The Ghost knew. On the other hand, he didn’t pry, and besides he hadn’t told Ethan anything of his own life away from the excavation. Ethan knew nothing of Maggie or the denizens of the tunnel, and The Ghost hadn’t told his handler that he often lay awake shivering with the cold, his eyes damp with memories of Mother and Father and jasmine-scented Amritsar. Or that the dying face of Dani continued to haunt his nightmares. Lips drawn back. Bloodied teeth. A mouth full of steel and crimson.

He just continued to exist, working shifts at the dig, burying his spade in its special hiding place before going home to the tunnel and looking after the people there.

And then, four nights ago – four nights before the body had been discovered at the dig, this was – The Ghost had been making his way home, when as usual he’d glanced into the churchyard – but this time saw the gravestone leaning to the left.

Instead of going back to the tunnel he turned and went in the opposite direction, heading for Paddington. It would be a long walk but he was used to it. It was all part of the daily penance he paid for his …

Cowardice, he sometimes thought, in those moments of great darkness before the dawn freezing in the tunnel.

But he hadn’t been a coward the night he had saved Maggie, had he? He had fought for what was right.

So maybe not cowardice. At least not that. Failure to act instead. Hesitancy or unwillingness – whatever it was that had stayed his hand the night of his blooding, and heaped such great shame on himself and his family name.

By rights he should have paid with his life, and would have done – were it not for the intervention of Ethan Frye. Sometimes The Ghost wondered if his

ultimate act of cowardice was in accepting the older Assassin's offer.

The sounds of the street – a cacophony of hooves, traders and a busker's sawing fiddle – all fell away as he walked, lost in thought, his mind going back to The Darkness. When the door had opened that morning it was to admit his executioner. Or so he had thought. Instead, Ethan Frye had reappeared, grinning broadly from ear to ear.

Ethan had checked himself at the sight of Jayadeep, whose expectation of death was written all over his face, and he took a seat on the straw, just as he had the previous day. Here, Ethan had explained to Jayadeep that he was required in London for an important mission; that Arbaaz had given his blessing for it.

It would involve him going undercover. 'Deep cover' was how Ethan had put it. And before Jayadeep went thinking this was some kind of pity mission, that Ethan was doing anything he could just to save the youngster from the Assassin's blade, he could think again. Ethan wanted Jayadeep because Jayadeep had been his star pupil.

'You'll remember I advised against sending you on Assassin assignment?' Ethan had said, and Jayadeep had nodded his head sadly. 'Well, that's because I saw in you a humanity that I think can be helpful to the Brotherhood. The job I have in mind is by no means pleasant. You will become a different person, Jayadeep, all vestiges of your former self buried within the folds of a new disguise. You will no longer be Jayadeep Mir, do you understand?'

Jayadeep had nodded, and then Ethan had left. Only this time the door remained open.

It took Jayadeep some moment of contemplation before he too rose to his feet and left – stepping out of The Darkness at last.

'The mission begins now,' Ethan Frye told him the next day at dusk. The warmth Jayadeep was used to seeing in his tutor's eyes was absent. Ethan's relief at having freed Jayadeep was short-lived. Now was time to attend to the next order of business, the next phase of the operation.

They stood alone on a harbour wall. The hulls of boats clunked together in the gentle swell, while gulls swooped and called and preened. 'I'm about to leave you,' said Ethan, looking the boy up and down, noting the pauper's clothes he wore, just as directed. 'You need to make your own way to London. Find somewhere to live, somewhere befitting a man of very limited means indeed. Here …' He handed Jayadeep a small pouch of coins. 'This is for your subsistence. It won't go very far so spend it wisely. And remember that from this moment forth you are no longer Jayadeep Mir, son of Arbaaz and Pyara Kaur of Amritsar, accustomed to comfort and wealth and the attendant respect of others.

When you arrive in London you arrive as the scum of the earth, a brown-skinned outsider without a penny to your name, which, incidentally, will be Bharat Singh. However, your code name – the name that I will know you by – is The Ghost.'

Jayadeep had thought then that he hated the name Bharat Singh. The Ghost suited him better.

'When you have lodgings I need you to find work,' continued Ethan, 'but at a very specific place, the significance of which will become clear in some months' time. I need you to find work at the Metropolitan railway dig in the north-west of the city.'

Jayadeep had shaken his head in confusion. Already there was so much to take in. A new life? A new job? All of it in a strange foreign land, without the benefit of his family name, without his father's tutelage and Ethan's guidance. It seemed impossible what was being asked of him. And now this. A railway?

'Don't worry about that just at the moment,' said Ethan, reading his thoughts. 'All will become clear when you're in London.' He ticked things off his fingers. 'First find lodgings of some kind. Lodgings suited to a man on the very lowest rung of the social ladder; then become acquainted with your surroundings, then secure employment at the Metropolitan railway dig. Is that clear?'

The young man could only nod his head and hope these mysteries would somehow solve themselves in due course.

'Good. You have three months from today to do it. In the meantime I need you to study this …'

A folder, leather-bound and tied with a thong, was duly produced from within the older Assassin's robes.

Jayadeep took it, turning it over, wondering what lay within.

'I suggest you read the papers during your passage and then toss the lot in the ocean. Just make sure you have committed its contents to memory. We shall meet on this day three months' hence, in the gardens of the Foundling Hospital off Gray's Inn Road at midnight. Now, and this is the most important aspect of what I'm telling you, under no circumstances are you to demonstrate that you have any abilities beyond those expected of a dirt-poor seventeen-year-old Indian boy. Walk small, not tall. You're not an Assassin and you are not to behave like one. If you find yourself under threat, then be cowed. If you appear to be a more competent and able worker than your fellow men, then try less hard. The important thing for you now is to blend in in every single way. You understand?'

The Ghost nodded, and water lapped at the harbour wall as the sun poked its way into a new day.

19

Lost in the memory of his final morning in India, The Ghost had almost walked past the house that acted as his meeting place with his handler.

Number 23 and 24 Leinster Gardens, Paddington, looked just like any other house on the street, but what only a handful of people knew – the neighbours, the builders, and, more pertinently, The Ghost and Ethan Frye – was that the two houses were, in fact, false fronts built to hide a hole in the ground.

It had been Charles Pearson's idea. Constructing his railway he had come across an immediate problem, which was finding an engine suitable for use underground. An ordinary steam engine with its usual emission would have suffocated passengers and crew straightaway. Since it is unacceptable for railway operators to kill their passengers, Pearson cast about for a solution. First he had the idea of dragging carriages through the tunnels using cables, and then, when that proved impractical, came up with a plan to use atmospheric pressure. That proved impractical too – though it was of course great fodder for the city's many satirists.

It was John Fowler who came to Pearson's rescue, in this as in so many aspects of the line. He had overseen the construction of an engine where smoke and steam would be diverted into a tank behind the engine. The only trouble was that the smoke and steam would need to be released at some point, and that was why number 23 and 24 Leinster Gardens, w2, were set aside, so that the engines from below could, quite literally, 'let off steam'.

The opening of the Metropolitan line was still over a year away, and it was here that The Ghost and Ethan Frye would meet.

'How are you?' said Ethan that night. He had been sitting on the edge of the void, staring down to where timbers criss-crossed just below his dangling boots.

The Ghost nodded but said nothing, a closed book. He took a seat next to Ethan. His bare feet dangling next to the boots of his mentor, a great darkness below them.

'You will be pleased to know we are moving to the next phase of the operation,' said Ethan. 'Matters are going to come to a head. You will find yourself under scrutiny. I have no doubt whatsoever that you will be followed

and your credentials checked by our Templar friends. Are you confident your cover remains absolutely secure?'

The Ghost pondered whether this was the time to tell Ethan about Maggie and his unofficial guardian role at the tunnel. It was a conversation he'd carried out in his head many times, imaginary explanations where he'd tell Ethan that one thing had led to another and that he hadn't intended to set himself apart, just that he had been unable to stand by and allow injustice to prevail. And surely Ethan would … Well, even if he didn't approve, then he would certainly understand, wouldn't he? And after all, it wasn't as though The Ghost were a recognizable public hero, front-page news in the *Illustrated London News*.

But no. He kept his mouth shut. He said nothing and walked willingly into the next phase of the plan.

'Which is what?' he asked.

Mischief lit his master's eyes. It was a look that The Ghost had come to love when he was a child in the security of Amritsar. Now, staring down into the void with only uncertainty ahead of him, he wasn't so sure.

'You will need to write a letter to our friend Mr Cavanagh. You can use your knowledge of Cavanagh to establish your credentials. I'll leave the details up to you. The important thing is that you tell Mr Cavanagh that he has a traitor in his ranks and that you hope to curry favour with him by unveiling this traitor.'

The Ghost nodded, his gaze fixed on the darkness below. 'I see,' he said when Ethan had finished. 'And what then?'

'Wait for a body to be discovered at the dig.'

'When?'

'Difficult to say. In the next few days, I'd imagine, depending on the rainfall.'

'I see. And am I allowed to know whose body will be discovered?'

'You remember our Templar friend, Mr Robert Waugh?'

The Ghost did indeed remember him. 'The pornographer?'

'The very same. Only Mr Waugh hasn't been altogether straight with his associates. He's been using his erotic prints to make a little extra money, a sideline I uncovered last night.'

'When you killed him?'

'Oh no, I didn't kill him.' Ethan slapped The Ghost heartily on the shoulder. 'You did.'

20

As he returned from his meeting with Ethan, The Ghost reflected on the first time he became aware of the man he now saw every day at the dig. The man known primarily as Cavanagh. It was on the passage from Amritsar to England, when he had done as he was told and opened the folder given to him by Ethan on the harbour wall.

Inside was an introductory note from Ethan explaining that the contents were dispatches copied and decoded from a Templar haul. The papers had been replaced; as far as the Assassins knew the Templars had no idea they were in possession of the information.

The dispatches had been compiled from first-hand accounts assembled by Templar documentarians, and they began innocuously enough with a factual account of the English retreat from Kabul in 1842.

The Ghost knew all about the march from Kabul of course. Everybody did. It was one of the most disastrous events of English military history, and the turning point of the godforsaken war in Afghanistan. Sixteen thousand soldiers, families and camp followers had embarked on a ninety-mile retreat from Kabul to Jalalabad in January 1842. Only a handful made it.

Not only did they have food for just five days, but their leader, Major-General William Elphinstone – otherwise known as Elphy Bey – had a head as soft as his body was frail. Not only was he idiotic but he was gullible, and he believed every lie that the Afghan leader, Akbar Khan, told him.

And Akbar Khan told Elphey Bey a lot of lies. In return for the British army handing over the majority of their muskets, Khan guaranteed safe passage, as well as offering an escort through the passes. He also gave assurances that the sick and wounded left in Kabul would be unharmed.

It took Khan roughly an hour to go back on his word. The march had only just left the cantonment when his men moved in to loot, burn tents and put the wounded to the sword. Meanwhile, the rearguard was attacked. Porters, camp followers and Indian soldiers were butchered, and with little or no resistance from the column the Afghans began mounting increasingly brazen sorties,

swiftly devastating the baggage train. Barely out of Kabul and the march left behind a trail of trunks and corpses.

Very few tents were taken on the march, and they were for women, children and officers. That night most lay down to sleep in the snow and by next morning the ground was littered with the corpses of those who had frozen to death in the night. Frostbitten and starving, the march pressed on, hoping to beat the worst of the weather and withstand the constant Afghan attack.

For reasons known only to himself, Elphy Bey ordered a rest at just two o'clock in the afternoon, when what he should have done was heed the advice of his officers and press on through the dangerous Khord-Kabul Pass. Perhaps the old boy had simply lost his mind completely, for his decision meant handing the pass to the Afghans whose snipers took up position on the ledges, while their cavalry readied themselves for more sport.

Sure enough, shots began to ring out as the column entered the pass the following morning, and the march stopped as negotiations were carried out. Akbar Khan agreed to let the column through in exchange for hostages, but his deceit knew no bounds, for after the hostages were handed over the firing began again, while mounted tribesmen rode into the column, scattering followers, hacking down civilians and soldiers and even carrying off children.

Three thousand lost their lives in the pass and all supplies were lost. That night the remnants of the march camped with just four small tents and no fuel or food. Hundreds died of exposure.

The killing continued over the next few days. To escape the massacre some killed themselves while others deserted, though they were not allowed to escape by the Afghans, who only spared those they might ransom later – the officers, wives and children. Soldiers, servants and followers were butchered.

By the fifth day the column numbered just three thousand – five hundred of them soldiers. Elphy Bey gave himself up, later to die in captivity, while the wives and families surrendered also. Still the march struggled on, numbers dwindling, and was attacked at the Jugdulluk Crest, suffering appalling casualties. Running battles took place overnight, in feet of snow, until the survivors got to Gandamak, by which time they numbered fewer than four hundred.

They took up position on a hill, but found themselves surrounded by Afghans, who commanded them to surrender. 'Not bloody likely!' scoffed a sergeant, and his retort would become something of an English national catchphrase. He was as good as his word, though, so the Afghan snipers went to work before a final attack.

Jugdulluk Crest was no battle; it was a massacre. Six officers escaped, five of whom were cut down on the road to Jalalabad. Just one, William Brydon, made it. Part of his skull had been sheared off by an Afghan sword stroke but he'd survived the blow thanks to a copy of *Blackwood's Magazine* stuffed into his hat. 'Never knew this old bit of Lolland drivel could come in so handy,' he'd apparently remarked.

Of the sixteen thousand who had set off from Kabul six days previously, he was the only one to reach his destination.

Except … not quite. The story of good old William Brydon making it alone to Jalalabad was a good one – so good that it loomed large in the public consciousness for some time. Sadly, however, it was not quite the truth, because there were other survivors. Just that the methods and means of their survival were not quite so noble as the stoicism of Dr William Brydon. A man will do anything to survive, to live to see another sunrise, feel the lips of his wife and children, laugh along with a drink in his hand. So, yes, there were others who lived through that disastrous march, but their exploits were not to be applauded, celebrated, sung about nor later immortalized by artists. They were not even 'exploits' at all, in the sense that the word suggests adventure and derring-do. They were acts of survival, pure and simple. Dirty and mean and ruthless and executed at a dreadful cost to others.

And so it was that on the march there was a certain commander who went by the name of Colonel Walter Lavelle. This man belonged to the Order of the Knights Templar. He was not an especially high-ranking Templar, not a person of interest to the Assassin Brotherhood, but known to them nevertheless.

Shortly before the march was due to leave Kabul, a corporal by the name of Cavanagh inveigled himself with Walter Lavelle.

'I wonder if I could have a word, sir,' said this Cavanagh on the morning of the march.

Seeing a certain seriousness and, if he was honest with himself, a little danger in this man's eyes, Lavelle had nodded, despite the fact that the man was a mere corporal, and the two soldiers moved to the shelter of a cypress tree, away from where servants and followers were loading carts, and horses struggled beneath the weight of panniers and saddlebags. Indeed, the courtyard was a hive of industry. Above the sound of men cursing and struggling and orders being issued and women wringing their hands and crying, came the constant exhortations of Lady Florentia Sale, the wife of Major General Robert Henry Sale, a woman in whose honour the word 'redoubtable' might well have been minted. Lady Sale left nobody in doubt that she considered this march a mere afternoon excursion,

a matter of little import for the might of the English army and that to think otherwise was treacherously un-English. ‘Oh do cease your bawling, Emily, and make yourself useful,’ she would exhort. ‘You there, have a care. That is my very best Madeira wine. And you, watch that china or my Jalalabad soirées will be somewhat lacking in finesse. I’m planning my first one two days hence. What a hoot it will be to meet the good ladies of Jalalabad.’

Away by the cypress tree, Corporal Cavanagh turned to Lavelle and in a dead-eyed way said, ‘She’s a fool.’

They were well out of earshot but even so the colonel spluttered indignantly, as colonels were in the habit of doing. ‘Have you gone mad, sah? Have you taken leave of every single one of all your senses at bloody once? Do you know who you’re talking to, man? Do you know who you’re talking *about*? That is –’

‘I know full well who I’m talking to and who I’m talking about, sir,’ replied Cavanagh evenly (by gad the man was a cool fish and no mistake), ‘and it’s precisely because I know who I’m talking to that I feel I can talk openly. Forgive me if I misjudged the situation and I shall retire to continue preparing the men of my section.’

He made as though to walk away, but Lavelle stopped him, curious to hear what was on the impertinent corporal’s mind. ‘I’ll hear you out, man. Just mind your tongue is all.’

But Cavanagh did nothing of the sort. He planned to speak his mind and speak it he did. ‘Do you know how far it is to Jalalabad? It’s ninety miles. We have an army of fourteen thousand, but hardly a quarter of them are soldiers, the rest of them a great rabble: porters, servants, women and children. Hardly a fighter among them. Do you know what the conditions are like, sir? We’ll be marching through a foot of snow on the worst ground on earth and the temperature freezing. And what of Akbar Khan? He’s been in the hills, going from this chief to that, gathering support for further hostilities. Khan will not stand by his word. As soon as we step outside those gates he will begin taking us apart. Lady Sale thinks she’ll be having her first Jalalabad soirée in two days’ time. I say we’ll be lucky to make that march in two weeks. We don’t have arms, ammunition, nor enough food or supplies. The march is doomed, sir, and we are doomed with it unless we join forces to take action.’

He went on to tell Lavelle that he had a reasonable command of Pushtu, and suggested that he took a position as Lavelle’s batman. But Lavelle hadn’t finished spluttering, and he did a bit of blustering as well, and when that was over he dismissed Cavanagh with a flea in his ear, telling him not to be so impertinent and to keep his treacherous thoughts of desertion to himself.

‘You must have hoped to curry favour with me, y’wretched lickspittle!’ he roared, ‘For whatever reason I cannot imagine, but I’m telling you I remain General Elphinstone’s faithful servant to the very last.’

By the first night of the march it was clear that Akbar Khan had indeed gone back on his word and that Elphy Bey was a fool. And as the column rang to the screams of wounded men and the Afghan sorties continued, and poor unfortunates froze where they lay, a terrified and craven Lavelle crept into Cavanagh’s tent to ask if the corporal would agree to be his batman.

‘Me, a mere wretched lickspittle?’ said Cavanagh, his face betraying nothing of the dark satisfaction he felt at the look of panic on the colonel’s face. He demurred and refused, acting offended, until he elicited an apology from the quaking colonel.

The next morning, as British Lancers rode against the Afghans in a futile attempt to deter further attacks, Cavanagh, Lavelle and a faithful sepoy, whose name is not recorded, left the company for good.

Their path through the hills and passes was treacherous. They didn’t dare get too near the column for fear of being seen by either the British soldiers or their Afghan attackers, but neither did they want to stray too far from established routes. The Afghan countryside was well known for being among the most hostile on the face of the known world, never more so than in the unforgiving frost of January, and what’s more the men feared falling into the hands of far-flung tribes.

They had feed for their mounts, but as they made their way through the cliffs and peaks of the pass it became clear that they had seriously miscalculated when it came to food for themselves. So when, in the late afternoon of the third day, the chill breeze brought to them the smell of cooking meat, their stomachs were as alert as their senses.

Sure enough they soon came upon five Afghan hillmen on the track. They were tending to a fire in a clearing, over which they were roasting a goat, with sheer rock on one side of them and a vertiginous drop on the other.

The three deserters took cover immediately. Like all English soldiers they maintained a healthy respect for the fighters of Afghanistan – theirs was a warrior nation: the men were skilled and fearsome, and the women notorious for their ghastly methods of execution, with flaying and ‘the death by a thousand cuts’ among the least sadistic.

So the trio stayed hidden behind a large boulder: the sepoy, implacable, a picture of steely resolve, despite knowing how the Afghans treated their Sikh prisoners; Lavelle wordlessly ceding authority to Cavanagh, who thanked God

the tribesmen had not thought to post a lookout and, in a series of quick glances, took stock of the situation.

Well, there was no making a detour round the position, that was for sure. In order to continue along the path, Cavanagh, Lavelle and the sepoy would have to engage them in combat – either that or return to the column and explain their absence and most likely be shot for desertion.

Combat it was then.

There were five of them, wearing skullcaps or turbans and long coats. Tethered nearby were horses loaded with supplies, including the carcass of a second goat. The Afghan rifles, called jezzails, were arranged in a tepee shape not far from the campfire.

Cavanagh knew the jezzail well. Home-made weapons, their long barrels gave them a considerable range advantage over the British Brown Bess musket used by Elphinstone's men. These Afghan warriors would use their jezzails to great effect against the column, with expert snipers firing a deadly barrage of bullets, nails and even pebbles down upon the beleaguered retreat some eight hundred feet below. They were intricately decorated, as was the Afghan custom; one of them was even adorned with human teeth.

However, noted Cavanagh, with relief, the jezzail was a muzzle-loaded weapon, and by the looks of things the stack in front of them were not primed. Either way, the tribesmen would reach for the Khyber knives at their waists. Excellent close-quarter weapons.

Cavanagh looked at his two companions. The sepoy, as he knew, was a decent shot. He wasn't sure about Lavelle, but he himself had trained at the Domenico Angelo Tremamondo fencing-master academy and was an expert swordsman.

(Here, The Ghost came across a note, presumably left by whichever Assassin curator had assembled the dossier. The writer wondered how a mere corporal had studied at the great Angelo's School of Arms in Carlisle House, Soho, in London, where the aristocracy were tutored in swordsmanship. Or, perhaps, to turn the question round: how a graduate of that particular academy had ended up a mere corporal? The note was appended with an inscription from Ethan, a single word. The Ghost knew it well from the dreaded Latin lessons Ethan had insisted upon as part of his tutelage. '*Cave*' it said, meaning beware.)

Cavanagh knew this was his chance to impress upon Lavelle that he was more than a mere deserter. The day before, when Lavelle had asked him why he might wish to curry favour, the question had gone unanswered. But the truth of it was that Cavanagh was well aware of Lavelle's position within the Order and wished to take advantage of it. So Cavanagh drew his sabre silently, gave his own service pistol to the sepoy, and indicated for Lavelle to ready his.

When the two men were in place he indicated for them to take the two tribesmen on the left.

Next he rose up slightly on his haunches, stretching out his calves. The last thing he needed was his legs seizing up when he made his move.

Which he did. Trusting Lavelle and the sepoy to be accurate and putting his faith in the element of surprise and his own not-inconsiderable swordsmanship, Cavanagh sprang from behind the boulder to do battle.

He saw the soldier on the left spin and scream at the same time as he heard the pistol shot from behind, and then came a second shot, this one not so accurate but enough to lift the next man off his feet and take him down clutching at his stomach. As the second tribesman turned and snatched for the Khyber knife at his waist, Cavanagh reached him and attacked with the sabre, a single chopping blow to the neck that opened the carotid artery, and then stepped nimbly away to avoid the rhythmic fountain of blood.

The Englishman had chosen his first strike deliberately. Afghan warriors were as tough and unflappable as they come, but even they could not fail to be disturbed by the sudden appearance of bright arterial spray arcing and splattering in the dying light of the afternoon. It sent the other two into a state of disarray, one of them wiping his comrade's blood from his face with one hand, even as he reached for his curved knife with the other.

His knife cleared the belt but that was all. Cavanagh spun his own blade mid-air as he swung backhand, slicing open the luckless hillman's throat. The man's skullcap tumbled from his head as he folded to the dirt with blood sheeting down his front and a final wet death rattle, but there was no time for Cavanagh to bring his sabre to bear and take the last man. He heard a shot from behind and felt the air part, but the shot went wild. Too late he saw the Khyber knife streak from outside his peripheral vision, and though there was no immediate pain he felt the hot wash of blood coursing down his face.

[A note from the dossier curator: *NB Cavanagh bears this scar to this day.*]

Had the Afghan pressed home his advantage he might have made it out of the clearing alive, and maybe even with the blood of a British corporal to show for his pains. Instead he chose to make a break for the horses. Possibly he hoped to escape and warn his friends; maybe he knew of a loaded pistol secreted within the saddlebags. Unfortunately for him the sight of a terrified man running towards them was too much for the normally imperturbable Afghan steeds and they reared up, pulled their tethers free and scattered.

Hell's teeth, cursed Cavanagh, as he watched the horses, the supplies and not to mention the second goat carcass, go scarpering out of sight along the frosty track.

Meanwhile, the Afghan wheeled, his teeth bared and his Khyber knife slashing. But Cavanagh went on guard sabre-style, his right hand raised, the point of the sword tipping downwards, and it was with some satisfaction that he saw the tribesman's eyeballs swivel up and to the left for a second before he buried the tip of his blade into the man's face.

In the aftermath of the battle was silence. The gut-shot Afghan writhed and moaned, and Cavanagh delivered the coup de grâce, wiping his sabre clean on the man's robes, which were already so bloodstained as to be useless.

'Quick, grab whatever clothes you can before the blood ruins them,' he told Lavelle and the sepoy, who had emerged from behind the rock. The sepoy had acquitted himself well, just as Cavanagh always thought he would, and Cavanagh congratulated him. Lavelle congratulated Cavanagh. Nobody congratulated Lavelle.

The three men ate heartily of goat, which having been left unattended during the conflict was slightly overdone. Not that it mattered to the ravenous British. They ate until their bellies were full of overcooked goat, and after that they donned the robes and turbans of the dead, cobbling together what outfits they could that didn't show obvious bloodstains. When that was done, they hid the bodies as best they could and carried on their way.

For a day they rode, staying ahead of the retreating column, a mile or so as the crow flies. Despite the distance they heard the constant crack of shot, even the occasional shriek of pain that was carried to them on the chill wind. Cavanagh began to grow in confidence. They drew further away from prescribed routes, finding a new track higher up the rock pass. And then, on the afternoon of the fifth day, they came upon the outskirts of another much larger travelling encampment. And they faced their most difficult test yet.

21

Thinking about it later, Cavanagh would come to the conclusion that they had happened upon a roaming settlement belonging to one of Akbar's warlords. From such a base the chieftain could dispatch snipers to take up position on the passes above the column, where they would use their jezzails to rain devastation on the poor marchers below, and send riders to make their way down near hidden paths to the floor of the pass, where they could make terrifying damaging charges into the rear, less well-guarded sections of the column, mercilessly cutting down servants, women and children and plundering what few supplies were left.

It was here that Cavanagh's knowledge of Pushtu came in handy. Indeed, it saved their lives. Coming over the brow of a hill, with their horses slipping and sliding on a frosty, flinty path, they were hailed by a lookout.

Thank God. The man had taken one look at their garb and from a distance taken them to be Afghans. When he called hello, Cavanagh's quick thinking once again saved the day, for instead of showing surprise and taking flight, he kept his composure and replied in kind.

At his signal, the three men came to a halt. Some two hundred yards in front of them the lookout had risen from behind a rocky outcrop, his jezzail slung across his back. His features were indistinct as he cupped his hands to his mouth and called again in Pushtu. 'Hello!'

Cavanagh's mind raced; there was no way they could get too close: they would be recognized as imposters. But the Afghans would mount a pursuit if they turned tail and fled, and being the superior horsemen it would in all likelihood be a short pursuit indeed.

Sitting beside him, Lavelle's eyes flicked nervously. 'What the hell are we going to do, man?'

'Shut up,' hissed Cavanagh, oblivious to Lavelle's outrage. 'I'm thinking. Just whatever happens, don't say another word and follow my lead.'

Meanwhile, the lookout, again with his hands cupped to his mouth, was calling to unseen others behind him, and faces appeared from the landscape. Six or seven men. Christ, they'd almost ridden slap-bang into the middle of the

camp. They now stood staring across the space between the two groups, one or two of them shielding their eyes against the dying winter sun, all no doubt wondering why their three visitors had stopped on the perimeter of the camp.

Cavanagh's mind reached for answers. Couldn't run. Couldn't advance. And any attempts to answer any further interrogation would surely expose his shaky grasp of Pushtu.

One of the men unslung his rifle, but Cavanagh pre-empted what might happen next and called out to him before he could bring the weapon to bear. 'My good friend, we come from hounding the British cowards. With us is a captured Sikh scum. A man trying to adopt our dress and escape as a deserter.'

From over the way came Afghan laughter. Unschooled in Pushtu, the sepoy sat oblivious to what awaited him. Loyal, faithful.

'What are you saying, man?' demanded Lavelle.

'Quiet,' snapped Cavanagh back.

His voice rose again. 'Here. We'll leave our prize with you as a gift for your women, and take our leave if we may.'

With that he drew his stolen Khyber knife and in one quick movement pretended to cut binding at the sepoy's hands. Confused, the sepoy turned in his saddle to face Cavanagh, his face clouding with confusion. 'Sir?' But Cavanagh reached down, snatched the man's foot and dragged it upwards, unseating him at the same time as with one almighty and merciless slice of the Khyber knife blade he slashed open the desperate man's Achilles tendon.

As the Afghans over the way jeered and laughed, Cavanagh waved goodbye, and he and Lavelle pulled their horses round. At the same time the sepoy tried to pull himself off the ground, but his torn-open heel folded beneath him gushing blood, and he was sent back to the ground mewling and pleading. 'Sir? Sir?'

But they left him there, to his fate at the hands of the Afghan women. Flaying alive or death by a thousand cuts. They left the nameless sepoy there to die an unspeakable death, so that they might save themselves.

'Christ, man, that was cold,' said Lavelle later, when they had made camp in the rocks above the pass.

'It was him or us,' said Cavanagh.

That night the sound of gunfire came to them, and both men fancied that they could also hear the screams of the sepoy in the far distance, as the Afghan women began their work.

22

The Ghost had seethed with hatred for Cavanagh. A month or so later, when he faced the men in the churchyard, he understood the strength of the impulse to survive. That he understood. But what he could not understand (and maybe this was why he was never truly cut out for a life of bloodshed) was the ability to sacrifice another man's life, to let another man die in your stead. Not only that, but a man who'd shown you nothing but loyalty.

He wondered whether the face of that sepoy haunted Cavanagh in his dreams. Did he feel anything at all?

The dossier had gone on. Cavanagh and Lavelle had turned up at Jalalabad a day after William Brydon had made his historic appearance. Their survival went unheralded, shrouded as it was in rumour and suspicion.

Despite their insistence, and the fact that they had steadfastly stuck to a prepared and detailed story about becoming detached from a cavalry section and losing their way, the gossip at the Jalalabad Cantonment was that the two men had deserted. Nothing about Lavelle suggested any other explanation, but when, on 7 April 1842, the Jalalabad garrison attacked Akbar Khan's lines, Cavanagh acquitted himself well, proving indomitable in combat.

His movements were next noted some years after his return to England, by which point he had gained a position for himself within the Templar Order. It was shortly after this that Colonel Walter Lavelle met with a fatal accident. According to the dossier the Assassins believed it was Cavanagh who had not only recommended but carried out the execution.

Up until this point, The Ghost had been wondering where he came in. Why was he reading about this man Cavanagh?

Then it became clear. The next time Cavanagh appeared as a person of interest to the Assassins was when, quite out of the blue, he had secured an appointment with the company building the world's first underground railway line. He became a director at the Metropolitan Railway and directly involved with the excavation. The company's 'man on the ground', as it were.

Now The Ghost was beginning to understand.

When he arrived in England he did as he'd been told by Ethan. He found lodgings at the tunnel and he gained an appointment to the Metropolitan dig, though in a rather less exalted position than his quarry. And so it was that he had been there at New Road to see the shaft sunk. He had seen wooden houses on wheels come into view, then wagons piled high with timbers and planks, men armed with pickaxes and shovels marching by their side like an oncoming army.

He had bought a spade from a drunken man in a pub, etched the name of 'Bharat Singh' into it and then joined them. He had helped to enclose hundreds of yards of roadway, when New Road had been transformed from a part of London's history to a significant part of its future. Horses, carpenters and troops of navvies had arrived, the sound of pickaxes, spades and hammers and the passing of steam began, a clamour that was rarely to cease, day or night.

Huge timber structures sprung up at intervals along the centre of the road, spots for opening shaft holes were marked out, iron buckets had been brought on to the roadway, which was dragged up, peeled reluctantly away from the surface of the earth and carted off to be tilted down a gaping pit; the noise of it like a storm – another distant rumble to add to the din that was to reign from then on.

The Ghost had been there for all of the problems encountered by the line. On paper it had been a simple – well, a relatively simple – operation: Paddington to Euston Road and the Fleet Valley to the city. But gas pipes, water mains and sewers had all stood in its way, and along Euston Road they had discovered that the land was made up of sand and gravel, which had to be drained, while at Mount Pleasant the usual policy of cut-and-cover had been abandoned and a tunnel dug.

Meanwhile, The Ghost had watched the world around him change. He had seen the squalid streets of the Fleet Valley destroyed. A thousand homes were demolished and the twelve thousand people who lived there (a damning statistic by itself) displaced to other slums.

Some of them had come to the Thames Tunnel. Perhaps some of them had enjoyed the benefit of the benign form of protection that The Ghost provided there. There was a circularity to the process that he could appreciate.

At the site his bare feet were often the subject of a remark, and of course his skin tone marked him apart, but otherwise he never did anything to stand out. He never attempted a jump he knew he could make. He never carried loads he knew he was capable of bearing. If a joke was cracked, he laughed. Not too loudly, and not distinctively. This was how he maintained his cover, by ensuring that it remained solid at all times. So that when in future he was called upon to penetrate the organization further it would withstand any amount of examination.

He must be Bharat, the dirt-poor but conscientious Indian worker, below contempt and thus above suspicion. He must maintain that cover at all times.

Maintaining his cover was essential to staying alive.

The first day he clapped eyes on Cavanagh he had been manning one of the buckets, dragging it from the mouth of the trench to deposit its contents into a cart. Over the way he'd seen the door to the mobile office-on-wheels open and a familiar face emerge. Not Cavanagh, but Marchant, who managed the roster, ticked off names and passed the worksheets to the wages' clerks who appeared every Friday, setting up desk and handing out coins with pained expressions, as though it was their very own money. Oh yes, The Ghost knew Marchant. A weasel of a man with a wheedling, nasal voice.

And then came Cavanagh himself.

Just as The Ghost had been led to believe, Cavanagh had a horizontal scar below his right eye, almost two inches long. The eyes themselves were hard. The chin set. In all the times that The Ghost ever saw Cavanagh, it was impossible to know what he was thinking.

'I want to find out what they're up to,' Ethan had said.

They had met in the grounds of the Foundling Hospital, just as arranged on the harbour wall at home in India. Ethan had led The Ghost to a folly in the hospital grounds, where foliage obscured them from view. There the master had taken a good look at his former pupil, eyeing up the boy's rags, his general demeanour.

'Very good,' he said, when he'd finished giving the boy the once-over. 'Very good. You look the part, that much is certain.'

'I have a position at the dig,' said The Ghost, 'just as instructed.'

Ethan smiled. 'I know. I've been keeping tabs on you.'

'Is that wise?'

'Why wouldn't it be?'

In response, The Ghost shrugged and spread his hands. 'Anything that increases the chance of my deception being uncovered is to be discouraged.'

'Well, I see I taught you well,' smiled Ethan.

'You need to practise what you preach.'

'You'll excuse me if I don't accept advice from a young pup like your good self.' Ethan smiled in pretence of a little friendly badinage, but his eyes were flinty.

'You know,' said The Ghost, 'you shouldn't sit with your chin on your leading hand.'

'Oh?' Ethan's eyebrows raised in surprise. 'Pupil has turned teacher, has he? You have another lesson in Assassin-craft for me?'

‘You risk an accident with the blade.’

‘I deceive any potential opponent.’

‘There are no opponents here.’

‘Now who’s being careless?’

‘I didn’t say you were being careless, master. Just that mistakes can happen. They can happen to the best of us.’

He hadn’t meant that last statement to sound as significant as it did, and for a second he allowed himself to hope that Ethan might not pick up on it, but of course what Ethan lacked in focus he more than made up for in intuition and perception. ‘You think me careless?’

‘I didn’t say that.’

‘You didn’t need to.’

The Ghost glanced away. He had been looking forward to this meeting. Part of him anticipated his master’s praise. Somewhere along the line – and he wasn’t even sure how – the conversation had taken a wrong turn.

When he turned back to look at his old friend and tutor, it was to find Ethan regarding him with hard baleful eyes, but he decided to ask a favour anyway. ‘May I try on your hidden blade, master?’ he asked.

Ethan softened. ‘And why would you want to do that? Check it for maintenance, perhaps?’

‘I’d like the feel of it once again, to remind myself of what I am.’

‘To remind yourself you are an Assassin? Or to remind yourself of home?’

The Ghost smiled, unsure of the answer. ‘Maybe a little of both.’

Ethan frowned. ‘Well, I’d rather not. It’s perfectly calibrated.’

The boy nodded understandingly, though sadly.

‘Oh, get the stick out of your arse!’ exploded Ethan. ‘Of course you can have a go.’ And he yanked up the sleeve of his robes and reached for the buckles …

Some time later the two men, having resolved their unspoken differences, sat in silence. The Ghost could see the bronze glowing lights of the Foundling Hospital from his seat inside the folly and thought how peaceful it seemed, and how difficult it was to believe that just a few hundred yards away lay the turbulence of the Metropolitan dig. The new underground line was like a bended arm, and right now they sat somewhere near the elbow: Grays Inn Road, New Road – a world of turmoil.

Beside him, Ethan finished recalibrating his blade. That familiar snicking sound it made when he ejected it. Ethan was right – wearing it hadn’t made The Ghost yearn for his life as an Assassin. It had made him yearn for home.

The older Assassin flexed his hand to check for unintended discharge. He slapped his hands on his thighs, satisfied all was in order.

'I wonder if now is the time to tell me the purpose of my mission,' said The Ghost.

'You've guessed it is something to do with our friend Cavanagh, of course?'

The Ghost nodded. 'The dossier on him made interesting reading.'

'His position at the Metropolitan is an example of the level of power the Templars currently hold in London. They are very much in the ascendancy. They have the advantage of knowing how weak we are, though I rather doubt they realize just how weak. "We" in this context being myself and another member of the Brotherhood based not far away. And now you.'

'That's it?'

'That's it, my dear boy. The best we can do to challenge their supremacy is take little potshots in the hope of diminishing some of their fringe activities. Well, we can do that and we can do this. This being we can try to find out what their game is.'

'This?'

'Yes, this. This area of land in the north-west of London is, we think, of interest to the Templars. We think that they are digging for something. Perhaps a Piece of Eden.'

'A Piece of Eden? Like the Koh-i-Noor diamond?'

'Something like that, perhaps. Who knows? Something related to the First Civilization, Those Who Came Before. The point is we don't know and nor do we have the resources to interrogate the issue at any higher level.

'There is an advantage to that, of course. Without our involvement the Templars have no need to suspect that we harbour any suspicions about their activities. As a result, they may get careless. Nevertheless, it's a sad state of affairs. The fact is we have no idea how deep the Order has penetrated into London society, beyond a handful of names.'

The Ghost nodded as though satisfied, but nevertheless harbouring doubts. Meanwhile, Ethan opened his robes to reveal the brown-leather strap of a documents case. He lifted the flap and pulled from it a dossier – bound in the livery of the Assassins, just as the Cavanagh file had been – and handed it to The Ghost, watching wordlessly as the younger man began to leaf through pages of information gathered on active Templars in London.

Leading the pack, of course, was Crawford Starrick, the Templar Grand Master. Owner of Starrick Industries, Starrick Telegraph Company and the Millner Company, he'd once been called 'a great rail baron' by none other than Charles Dickens. Then there was Benjamin Raffles, the Templar kingpin and

Starrick's 'head of security', as well as another kingpin, Hattie Cadwallader, the keeper of the National Gallery, who maintained Starrick's extensive art collection.

Another kingpin: Chester Swinebourne, who had apparently infiltrated the police. Then there were Philip 'Plutus' Twopenny, the governor of the Bank of England no less; and Francis Osbourne, the Bank of England manager.

Second-in-command was Lucy Thorne. She specialized in the occult. The Ghost had seen her at the dig. Starrick too. Then there was Rupert Ferris of Ferris Ironworks. He'd been spotted at the works as well. As had Maxwell Roth. He wasn't a Templar, but he had helped them set up the London gangs.

Dr John Elliotson. Ethan knew him personally. He was the inventor of the panacea Starrick's Soothing Syrup.

Then there was Pearl Attaway, the proprietor of Attaway Transport and a cousin to Starrick. A gang boss called Rexford Kaylock. A sleazy photographer by the name of Robert Waugh (and now, of course, The Ghost knew all about him).

Still others: Sir David Brewster, Johnnie Boiler, Malcom Millner, Edward Hodson Bayley, James Thomas Brudenell, otherwise known as 'Lord Cardigan', a soldier called Lieutenant Pearce, a scientist called Reynolds …

The list was seeming endless.

'This is a rather large dossier,' said The Ghost at last.

Ethan smiled ruefully. 'Indeed it is. And these are just the ones we know about. In opposition? Just the three of us. But we have *you*, my dear boy. One day you will be recruiting spies of your own. One of them may very well be in this motley crew we have here.'

23

The night after the body was discovered, The Ghost glanced into the graveyard as he always did on his way home from the dig, and as usual his eyes sought out the gravestone through which Ethan communicated, and as usual it was …

Ah, no it wasn't. Not tonight. It was leaning to the right. *Danger*. Which to The Ghost meant something significant. Not that he was being followed by Cavanagh's men. He already knew that. But Ethan was around, keeping tabs on him still.

But to more pressing matters. There were indeed men following him. One of them had left the dig a few minutes before him. As the shift-change bell rang, The Ghost had seen Marchant nod discreetly to one of the three hired hands who were constantly to be found hanging around the office or on the dig. Their names were Hardy, Smith and Other Hardy – Cavanagh's own predilection for using his surname had either rubbed off on his men or been imposed upon them – and they were passed off as payroll security. The other men called them 'punishers', a certain breed who were expert at giving out a good hiding if you greased their palm with silver. But while The Ghost didn't doubt they were punishers of a sort, he also knew them for what they really were: Templar strongarms. They were professionals too. Big men, they were fit and alert; they didn't spend their time cracking jokes or whistling at the prostitutes who hung around the perimeter fence touting for business. They kept their minds on the job.

But they weren't *that* good, as the commencement of their covert pursuit of The Ghost proved; they weren't good enough to hide from him. The man who left at Marchant's signal – Other Hardy – was next to be seen leaning on a barrow wearing a look of studied disinterest, like he wasn't really scanning the crowds of departing workers that thronged the street for his quarry. When he caught sight of The Ghost, Other Hardy pushed himself off his barrow and moved on with a walk that could only be described as an 'amble', like he wasn't really set on staying just the right distance ahead of The Ghost.

Meanwhile, there would be another man behind him. Probably two: Smith and Hardy. And that was good, thought The Ghost, because that was just where he wanted them.

I hope you like a nice long walk, my friends, he said to himself, and then he spent the rest of the journey speeding up and slowing down, setting himself the challenge of making life as difficult as possible for his pursuers without actually tipping them off that he knew they were there.

Until, at last, he reached the tunnel. He'd long since left the crowds behind, of course. Ahead of him, Other Hardy was an almost lone figure now, as The Ghost approached the shaft. Some way away, the man stopped, making a pretence of needing to tie his bootlace, as The Ghost took the steps down into the tunnel rotunda. He had spent his day underground, and now he would spend his night there too.

Reaching the bottom, The Ghost stood among the neglected statues and careworn features – once so swanky and plush, now rotting – and gazed upwards, making a show of enjoying the view. Sure enough, he sensed figures on the steps above him pushing themselves into the shadows. He smiled. Good. This was good. He wanted them to see where he lived.

'Some men may come in the next few days,' he told Maggie later. By then he had checked on Charlie and given him bread, and he'd attended to Jake, pleased to see the old lag's leg was on the mend. And with those two tasks complete, he had continued further along, deeper into the sepulchral darkness of the tunnel, picking his way past alcoves crammed with rag-swaddled bodies.

Some of them slept; some stared at him with wide white eyes from inside their unwelcoming hidey-holes, silently watching him pass; and some greeted him with a wave – 'Hello, Bharat', 'Hello, lad' – or perhaps a simple blinked salute.

Some he knew by name, others from their jobs: Olly, for example, was a 'pure-finder', which meant he collected dog shit to sell on Bermondsey Market, but who had a tendency to bring his work home with him. The Ghost held his nose as he passed Olly, but raised a short wave anyhow. Many of them had candles, and he was grateful for the light; many did not, and lay shivering in the dark, alone with their pain, weeping as they awaited the crispy dawn and the beginning of another day of soul-destroying survival in London – the world's most advanced city. The shining jewel of Her Majesty's great empire.

And then he reached Maggie, who tended a small fire. She would have been doing so most of the evening, ladling broth into the bowls of any tunnel inhabitant who came asking. They all received their food, or 'scran' as it was known, with a mixture of gratitude and devotion, and left thanking Maggie and singing her praises; but mostly they all looked fearfully beyond her to where the light lost its battle with the shadows, and darkness reigned literally and metaphorically, and they thanked God for the young Indian man who some of

them knew as Bharat and some of them knew as Maggie's lad, who had brought order to the tunnel, and made it so that they could sleep more easily in their alcoves at night.

And there they sat, side by side, Maggie and The Ghost with their backs against the damp tunnel wall and the dying fire at their feet. Maggie's knees were pulled up and she hugged herself for warmth. Her long grey hair – 'my witchy hair', she called it – lay over the fabric of a filthy grey skirt, and though her boots had no laces she said she preferred them that way. She hated feeling 'trussed up', she always said. Once upon a time, long ago – 'before you were even a glint in your daddy's nutsack' – she'd seen pictures of Oriental ladies with bound feet, and after that she'd never worn laces in her boots again. She felt things keenly for her fellow man, did Maggie.

Now her features rearranged themselves into a picture of apprehension and concern. 'And why,' she asked, 'will men be coming for you?'

'They'll be asking questions about me,' The Ghost told her, 'and they may well be pointed in your direction.'

She gave an indignant harrumph. 'Well, I bloody well hope so. They bloody well *ought* to be.'

As well as helping others, Maggie liked people to know about it. She liked her efforts to be recognized.

'I'm sure they will,' said The Ghost with a smile. 'And I would like to ask you to be careful about what you say.'

She looked sharply at him. 'What do you mean?'

'I mean that there will be others who live in the tunnel who will say that I protect you from the thieves and vagabonds who live further along, and that is acceptable; they will paint a picture of me of a man who is no stranger to violence and I have no problem with that. What I don't want is for these men to be furnished with an exaggerated account of my abilities as a fighter.'

She dropped her voice. 'I've seen you in action, don't forget. There ain't no exaggerating your abilities as a fighter.'

'That's exactly what I mean, Maggie. That's exactly the sort of thing I don't want you to say. A man of violence but not necessarily a man of great skill, do I make myself understood?'

'I'm getting there.'

'They are likely to ask you exactly how we met, but … Tell them what you like. Tell them you found me drunk in a gutter. Just don't tell them about what happened at the churchyard.'

She reached for his hand. Her weathered hand was almost the colour of his own. 'You're not in any trouble, are you, Bharat?'

‘I’m touched you should worry.’

She chuckled. ‘Oh, like I say, I’ve seen you in action. It’s the others who should worry, but …’

His head dropped. ‘But …?’

‘But I also saw you hesitate when you had that murderous little toff bang to rights, and I saw the fight drain out of you, just as surely as if you’d been uncorked. I saw someone who’s very good at dealing death but ain’t got no heart for doing it. Now, I’ve met lots of evil bastards with a sadistic streak long as your arm, who would go knocking your teeth out of your mouth just because they had too many ales and fancied swinging their arm. Evil bastards who loved dishing out pain but only to those weaker and more vulnerable than themselves. Christ only knows, I’ve been married to two of them. And what’s more, I’ve seen men who was good at fighting and could handle themselves if a brawl broke out, and who would do what they had to do given the circumstances, and maybe take a grim pride in their work, and maybe not.

‘But what I ain’t *never* seen is a man so good at fighting as you, who had so little stomach for it.’

The Ghost watched as she shook her head in disbelief, her grey hair sweeping her skirts. ‘I’ve thought about that an awful lot, young man, believe you me. I’ve wondered if maybe you was a deserter from the army but not out of cowardice – oh no, I’ve never seen a man so brave – but because you’re one of them, what d’you call it? *Conscientious objectors.* Well, the truth of it is, that I don’t know, and from the sounds of what you’re saying now, it’s probably best I don’t, but what I do know is that you’ve got a big heart and there’s no room in this world for people with a heart like yours. This world eats up people with hearts like yours. Eat them up and spits them out. You ask if I worry? Yes, my boy, I worry. You ask why? That’s why.’

24

As he waited with the other men for their shift to begin, The Ghost wondered if the Templars had found what they were looking for, this artefact left by a civilization before our own, a buried time capsule awaiting discovery. What tremendous power might it have?

His mind went back to Amritsar as it so often did – his memories were all he had now and he would revisit them with all the reverence of a devout man before a religious shrine – and he thought of the Koh-i-Noor diamond and the spectacular all-powerful lightshow it had revealed, as though providing a portal to other worlds, deeper knowledge, more profound understanding – a map for mankind to find a better world.

But if it fell into the wrong hands?

He dreaded to think. But into his mind came unbidden images of enslavement. He saw every man and woman ground down like those at the tunnel, virtual slaves to be spat at and looked down upon, treated as something less than human by grinning masters who ruled from plushly appointed buildings. Men who took symbols and twisted their meaning to meet their own ideology. He saw agony and anguish. He saw a world without hope.

The bell rang, and the new shift barely acknowledged the departing men as they met like two opposing armies who couldn't be bothered to fight, passing one another on the mud, clutching their precious tools. Next The Ghost descended a series of ladders into the shaft, walking along the line until he came to the face, where the digging and scooping and carrying continued – it never really stopped – and soon he was filthy. Soon they all were. There were no divisions of colour in the underground; there was just whether you could work and how fast. There was only a cheerful or encouraging word for the man next door.

Bells were supposed to denote the passing of time, tolling on the hour. But either Marchant didn't enforce their ringing or The Ghost didn't hear them, because time simply trudged on without demarcation. Dig, dig, dig. The noise was the incessant scrape and clang of spades and pickaxes and the chatter of men

along the line, certain voices louder than the others, the comedians who, they say, kept the other's spirits up.

Most men preferred working on the cranes. They saw more sunlight. The metronomic to and fro of the crane served as a clock, denoting the passing of time that was absent in the trench. But not The Ghost. Down here seemed like a respite from all that. *Dig*, *dig*, *dig*, like an automaton. Mind wandering to home, to where he was Jayadeep again.

Besides, he was used to being underground.

25

‘Well, if it isn’t Police Constable 72 Aubrey Shaw of Covent Garden’s F Division,’ said Abberline, ‘all the way out here in Regent Street.’

A red-faced, rotund and rather glum-looking peeler looked up from his mug and peered balefully at Abberline, a moustache of ale-froth gleaming on his top lip.

‘Well,’ he sneered back, ‘if it isn’t Police Constable 58 Frederick Abberline of Marylebone’s D Division, also some way out of his jurisdiction, who can take his insinuations and stick them where the sun don’t shine.’

‘Who’s insinuating?’ said Abberline. ‘I’m coming straight out and saying that you’re skiving, mate, and I’ve caught you bang to rights.’

It was true. Both constables were a long way out of their respective patches, since they were in the Green Man pub on Regent Street. Abberline had thought he might find Aubrey here, seeing as how he wasn’t to be found on his patch and had a name as something of a regular. Aubrey was fond of cricket, and the Green Man was a haunt of players and enthusiasts. In the window were bats and stumps and other cricket paraphernalia, which no doubt suited Aubrey fine, as he could savour his ale without members of the public peering through the glass and seeing a peeler apparently enjoying a boozy break.

‘Anyway, I’m not skiving.’

‘Well, what do you call it then? Skiving, sloping off, showing a clean pair of heels to the Green Man to sink a brace of ales – it’s all much the same thing, ain’t it?’

Aubrey’s shoulders sank. ‘It ain’t skiving, and it ain’t sloping off. It’s more like skulking. No, wait a minute, it’s *sulking*. That’s what it is.’

‘And why would you feel the need to sulk, Aubs, eh?’ Abberline took a seat at the bar beside him. A barman wearing a clean white apron approached, but Abberline waved him away, because Fresh-faced Freddie didn’t drink on duty.

Beside him, Aubrey had unbuttoned the top pocket of his tunic to take out a folded piece of paper that he handed to Abberline. A crude imitation of a newspaper screamer was handwritten across the top of the page. ‘Have You Seen

This Man?' it said, while below it was a charcoal drawing of a man in robes carrying an improbably long knife.

'The blokes at the station are having a lot of laughs at my expense, I can tell you,' said Aubrey ruefully.

'Why would that be?'

'A double murder in the Rookery. I expect you've heard about it. I have a witness that saw –'

'A man in robes. Yes, I did hear.'

Aubrey threw up his hands in exasperation. 'See? This is exactly what I mean. The whole of bloody London knows all about my strange robed man with the very long knife. The whole of bloody London knows I'm *looking* for a man in fancy robes with a long knife, but no bugger apart from some old crone in the rookery has actually seen him. Mind you …' He looked sideways at Abberline. 'They all know about your missing body too, Freddie. Matter of fact, and you'll have to forgive me for thinking this, but since I heard about Freddie Abberline's incredible disappearing corpse, I did rather hope it might take the heat off me.'

Abberline gave a dry laugh. 'And no such luck?'

'No such luck. That's why you're here, is it? You're skulking too?'

'No. And as a matter of fact your robed man has cropped up in my missing-body case, would you believe?'

Aubrey's look of open incredulity was instantly replaced by another of derision. 'Oh yes, I know your game.' He looked over Abberline's shoulder as though expecting to see pranksters come chortling from the shadows of the pub. 'Who put you up to this?'

'Oh do pipe down, Aubs. I'm telling you that I believe in your robed man. That's something, isn't it?'

'Well, you'd be the first. You'd be practically the only one. Like I say, apart from the crone, nobody else has seen a robed man. I've asked every trader in Covent Garden Market. I must have asked half of the Rookery, and you would think that a robed man with an enormously long knife would stand out, wouldn't you? Eye-catching like. But no. Nobody's seen him. Nobody apart from that one witness. It's like he just appeared – and then disappeared.'

Abberline thought. For some reason that chimed with how he felt about the stranger at Belle Isle – a mysterious figure within the mist, his motives just as much a mystery. 'So who are your marks?' he asked.

'One of them was a lowlife went by the name of Boot. Petty thief. Runner for various East End gangs.'

'No stranger to the blade, no doubt.'

'Yeah, but, no … Actually, he was shot.'

‘He was shot? What about the other one?’

‘Ah, here’s where it gets sad, Freddie. It was a little girl. Got in the way, looks like.’

‘And was she shot too?’

Aubrey threw him a look. ‘Most people take a second to reflect on the tragedy of a little girl being gunned down, Freddie.’

‘Ah, so she *was* shot?’

‘Yeah, she was shot.’

‘Right, so a witness saw a man in robes, carrying what looked like a wickedly long blade?’

‘Thin as well, this blade. More like one of them fencing swords. Like a rapier.’

‘Not for cutting. For combat. For stabbing. Yet this man Boot and the little girl were both shot?’

‘That’s right.’

‘So you’re looking for a mysterious robed figure who shot two people with a knife?’

‘Ooh, me sides, I think you’ve split ’em.’

Abberline sighed. ‘Was the gun ever found?’

‘No.’

And now the younger peeler was thinking about the gun he’d found on the body. He was thinking about the puncture wound he found on the body.

‘You only had the one witness?’

‘Another one, who only saw a bloke running away.’

‘Was he wearing funny robes?’

‘The witness or the guy running away?’

‘The guy running away.’

‘No.’

‘So he could be the shooter?’

Aubrey looked at him, a little shame-faced. ‘Well, he could be I suppose. Never really thought about it. I had the knife-carrying figure in the robes to occupy me, didn’t I?’

Abberline threw up his hands. ‘Bloody hell, Aubs. Come on, sup up. You and me are going back to the Rookery.’

An hour later and poor old Aubrey Shaw was even more despondent. His first witness, the crone who’d seen the man in robes, was nowhere to be found. ‘She’s disappeared, just like the mythical knifeman,’ Aubrey was bemoaning, although

both men knew that such was the itinerant life of the slums that she'd probably just packed up and moved on.

Thank God for small mercies, then, that they were able to find the second witness. Abberline thought he might have had a broken man on his hands otherwise.

'Here she is,' said Aubrey through the side of his mouth as they approached number 32. There on the steps of a tall smoke-discoloured and flat-fronted tenement sat a defeated woman. She gazed at them with eyes shorn of all emotion. She held a baby to one bare breast.

Aubrey coughed and looked down. Abberline desperately wanted to be worldly but failed, and he too felt himself colouring as he found something of great interest in a line of washing nearby. Both men did what a gentleman should do in such circumstances. They took off their hats.

'Excuse me, madam,' said Abberline. 'I believe you talked to my colleague here, Police Constable Aubrey Shaw, upon the matter of something you may have seen on the night of an horrific double murder right here in the Rookery. Would I be correct in making such an assumption?'

'Saints preserve us.' She smiled through teeth like timeworn gravestones. 'Don't you talk pretty?'

Abberline wasn't sure if she was taking the piss or genuinely being nice, but her face had lit a little, and her eyes softened, so he pressed home the advantage. 'Madam, did you see some fellow running down this very street on the night of the murder?'

She seemed to think, looking down at the baby's head. She adjusted the infant on her nipple then returned her attention to the two peelers on the steps below. 'That I did.'

'And he was just running, was he?'

'That he was.'

'Can you describe him?'

She sniffed haughtily. 'Like I told your friend there, I don't think I could describe him, no. Not without a couple of pennies like.'

Frowning, Abberline turned to Aubrey, 'You mean to tell me you could have got a description but for a few pennies?'

'It was all about the bloke with the robes, wasn't it?' Aubrey raised his hands defensively, colouring even more than usual.

'All about you being a tight-arse more like.'

'How was I to know you'd suddenly get all interested in some bloke running in the street? Matter of fact, why *are* you so bleedin' interested? He probably just

saw the blood, or better still the bloke with the knife, and thought he'd do well to make himself scarce. Wouldn't you?'

Abberline had stopped listening. He was already climbing the steps to press coins into the woman's palm, gallantly averting his face from her naked breast as he did so. 'Now, can you tell me what he looked like?'

She looked down at her hand as though wondering whether to quibble but then decided against it. 'He were a bloke in a suit with a big puffy moustache like what Prince Albert used to wear before he up and died, God rest his soul. And he had big thick side whiskers down here, bit like yours.'

'And tell me, madam, was he carrying anything?'

She looked shifty. Afraid.

Abberline leaned forward, still keeping his eyes primly averted but able to speak into the woman's ear. 'Was he carrying a revolver, by any chance?'

With her eyes she said yes. Abberline thanked her with his, and then withdrew.

As he and Aubrey made their way out of the slum, Abberline was ebullient. 'You see what this means, Aubs? It means that more than likely your running man and my corpse is the same bloke. And your man in robes is the same man who turned up at Belle Isle. This, my friend could crack the case wide open.'

'Thank God for that,' sighed Aubrey. 'Just maybe I'll be able to restore my reputation.'

Abberline sighed as well. 'There's also the small matter of truth and justice, Aubrey. Let's not forget that, eh?'

And in return the older man gave him a look that said, *You may be keen but you have an awful lot to learn*, saying, 'Truth and justice ain't gonna bring that little girl back, Freddie.'

Back at the station Abberline badgered Aubrey into asking the desk sergeant for the logbook, and as Aubrey went to make what he described as a 'well-earned brew' Abberline sat it on a lectern, hoisted himself up to a tall chair, and began leafing through the heavy pages in search of persons reported missing on the night of …

Ah. There it was. Bloody hell. Just one in this area. A man whose wife had made the report the evening after the night in question. He'd gone out to – oh, this was good – the Rookery, telling her he had a bit of business to attend to, and that he'd be back soon. Only he hadn't turned up.

His name was Robert Waugh. He lived not far from here.

'Aubs,' said Abberline, as the other PC returned to the front desk, two steaming mugs of tea in his fists. 'No time for that, we've got a house call to

make. We’re going to the home of Robert Waugh.’

26

‘Bharat Singh!’

It was late afternoon when his name came down, bouncing like a ball dropped into the shaft as it was passed from one man to another: ‘Bharat Singh … Bharat Singh … Bharat Singh …’

And though he was conditioned to respond to the name he’d been given he was too lost in thought to respond until the man next to him, barely pausing in his work, tapped him with the head of his pickaxe. ‘Hey, Indian, you’re wanted up top.’

He took to the ladders to find Marchant waiting for him at ground level. With him were the three punishers, and together they led The Ghost across the planks, traversing a reservoir of filth to the mobile office on wheels. Inside was Cavanagh – no Mr Pearson or Mr Fowler today – just Cavanagh, and he sat behind a wide polished-oak desk that was empty save for a document that The Ghost recognized at once.

Afternoon was becoming extinct, and in the dim light of the office Cavanagh’s scar shone dully as he picked up the letter for The Ghost to see. ‘Your name is Bharat Singh,’ he said without emotion. ‘Originally from Bombay, author of this correspondence?’

The Metropolitan director spoke in a more confidential register than The Ghost was used to hearing from the commands he barked to Marchant and the foremen of the trench.

‘Yes, I did sir,’ The Ghost acknowledged with a bow of the head.

Marchant had taken a place just behind his master, wearing the same oily smile he always wore. He stood close to him, as though he wished to reach out and touch Cavanagh just to draw on some of his master’s greatness. Behind him, meanwhile, the three strongarms had stepped in and fanned out.

This was it. This was the moment that, if Cavanagh had his suspicions, he would act. The Ghost weighed up possibilities. He already knew which of the men were strongest and which were weakest. Marchant had the honour of propping up that particular list. At the top, however, was the man behind the

desk, a man The Ghost knew from his dossier to be as ruthless as he was quick in combat.

'And your father was a sepoy at Jalalabad in 1842, you say?' said Cavanagh, allowing the letter to flutter to the tabletop.

The Ghost nodded.

'Very brave, the sepoys,' continued Cavanagh. 'I knew an especially courageous one once.'

The Ghost looked at him, hardly able to believe his ears as he thought of the poor nameless sepoy, but Cavanagh had already moved on. 'And your father knew me?'

'Knew *of* you, sir, though he would have liked the opportunity to become acquainted, I'm sure. I feel certain he would be envious of me now.'

Cavanagh raised a faintly bemused eyebrow. 'Oh yes? And why would that be, exactly?'

'He spoke very highly of you, sir. He talked of you as a hero, as the great soldier who survived the march from Kabul, that I should look out for your name as you were surely destined for greatness.'

'He thought I was "destined for greatness"? Why, because I can bear the cold and I'm handy with a sabre? Go out there and you'll find a hundred men who fought as fiercely as I did, served their country just as I did, and did what they could to survive, just as I did. None of them have achieved greatness. Not unless you consider it a great achievement to have Marchant shout at you day and night. None have reached my rank. What on earth made your father think I would be the one to thrive?'

'He was right, though, sir, wasn't he?'

Cavanagh acknowledged the point with a tilt of the chin, but … 'The question remains.'

The Ghost swallowed. *Here comes the moment of truth.* 'He mentioned an organization, sir,' he said, 'an organization that had taken an interest in you because of your talents. A very powerful organization, sir, and that having this organization's seal of approval was certainly enough to ensure your rise.'

'I see. And does it have a name, this organization?'

'The Knights Templar, sir.'

Marchant's oily smile remained fixed but his eyes narrowed as the words 'Knights Templar' dropped like a stone into the still pool of the room. Behind him, The Ghost sensed the three strongarms tense. Were they readying themselves for something The Ghost might do? Or something Cavanagh might?

'That's right. Your father was correct.' A brief smile flickered on the otherwise impassive face. His scar twisted. 'How gratifying to know such recognition

existed within the lower orders.'

The moment hung as Cavanagh sat back in his chair, fixing The Ghost with an assessing look, as if trying to decode signals the younger man refused to send. Whatever decision the director reached must be his alone, a product of trust in his own instinct. Nothing else mattered now, apart from gaining Cavanagh's trust.

And then the man behind the desk seemed to relax, indicating the letter. 'The second interesting aspect of your missive is this information you have on an employee of mine you are going to expose as a traitor. I wonder, would that have anything to do with my employee, Robert Waugh, who was found dead at the dig two days ago?'

The Ghost nodded.

'Tell me, how did you make the connection between him and me?'

'I saw him visiting your office, sir.' At this Cavanagh looked up to Marchant with a meaningful stare. 'And then when I saw him in a public house I knew it was him.'

'And that's how you knew he was indulging in, as you say, *treacherous activities*?'

'That's when I suspected, sir, yes.'

'And what made you decide to report it to me?'

Another moment of truth for The Ghost. Another point in his favour or a nail in his coffin, depending on what Cavanagh decided to believe.

'After what my father had told me, sir, I couldn't believe my luck in seeing you. Seeing your name and seeing the scar, and knowing it was the same scar with which you had returned from the doomed retreat, I decided that fate had brought me into your wider circle, but that it was up to me to enter the immediate one. The Knights Templar once looked upon you as a man of talent, who might be of use to them. I hope, now, that is how you look upon me.'

'That's all very well, and maybe even commendable, but at the moment, all I have is your word and a dead body, and I'm really not sure that either is all that much use to me.'

'It was I who killed Robert Waugh, in the hope that you would have given me the job eventually.'

Cavanagh snorted. 'Well, that was rather presumptuous of you, wasn't it? Because to return to my first point, I only have your word that he was a traitor.'

'He was selling your goods in the public houses, using a man named Boot to do the dirty work.'

Cavanagh shrugged. 'It sounds plausible but it's still lacking in concrete evidence.'

‘I killed him in the Rookery, sir. I took from him the evidence. A photographic plate that I have at my home.’

‘At the tunnel?’

The Ghost switched on a look of surprise. ‘You know where I live, sir?’

‘Oh yes. You like your tunnels, don’t you? We’ve been there and we’ve asked around, and you are a little bit more than just an *occupant* of the tunnel, aren’t you? By all accounts you’re the closest they have to a leader.’

‘I can read and write, sir. I was taught on my passage from India. I gained some medical knowledge also. For this reason, and the fact that I have on occasion stood up against the scum who also make the tunnel their home, some of the people who live there consider me their friend.’

Cavanagh smiled tightly. ‘Even so, it’s a very resourceful picture of you that is being painted.’

Judging this to be the right moment, The Ghost let a little eagerness creep into his voice. ‘A man who can be of use to you, sir. I do not nominate myself to your services lightly, sir. I hope that in me you see something of yourself.’

‘Yes, well, that remains to be seen.’ Cavanagh gave another tilt of his chin, suggesting he’d reached a decision in The Ghost’s favour. He addressed one of the strongarms behind him. ‘Smith, go to the tunnel, retrieve this photographic plate he’s talking about. Oh, and Smith, be nice to the old lady, won’t you? From what I can gather, she and our friend here are close.’

He looked significantly at The Ghost, who suppressed a dread thought, before continuing. ‘In the meantime you, Mr Bharat Singh, are going to accompany Marchant and Mr Hardy to visit the home of the recently widowed Mrs Waugh. And, Mr Hardy? Given that I’m certain we’re going to learn that our new associate is telling the truth, you don’t need to worry about being nice to Mrs Waugh. You can be as unfriendly to that old baggage as you like.’

Hardy grinned, revealing a gold tooth. He spoke with a voice like the scrape of spades at the tunnel face. ‘It would be my pleasure, sir.’

27

‘I don’t suppose you can drive a carriage, can you, lad?’ rasped Hardy when the three men stepped outside the gates of the dig to where their transport was tethered.

And The Ghost, who was an excellent horseman, and who had driven many a carriage back home, and who recognized an excellently sprung, beautifully upholstered Clarence when he saw one, took pains to look like the clueless bumpkin Hardy clearly thought him to be, and shrugged his shoulders and looked lost.

‘Good,’ said Hardy with flinty eyes. He scratched at his stubble then corrected the set of his hat. ‘Because nobody gets to drive Mr Cavanagh’s carriage apart from me, Mr Smith or Other Mr Hardy. Is that clear?’

‘I have no problem with that, sir,’ replied The Ghost. ‘Should I just join Mr Marchant inside, sir, where it’s warm?’

Hardy shot him a look, as though to say *don’t push your luck*, and in the next moment occupied himself with pulling on a scarf, topcoat and mittens, ready for the short journey to Bedford Square.

The Ghost, meanwhile, stood to the side of the Clarence, awaiting Marchant, and then opening the door for the clerk when he appeared. Without a word of thanks Marchant stepped inside before fussily arranging a blanket over himself and leaving none for The Ghost, who took a seat opposite. When he was settled, Marchant yanked a cord and then made a point of ignoring The Ghost to stare out of the carriage window. Up top Hardy shook the reins and the carriage set off for the home of Mrs Waugh.

When they arrived The Ghost watched with implacable interest as Hardy stepped down from the seat of the carriage, removed his mittens and pulled on a pair of leather gloves instead, flexing his fingers with a grim and business-like air and fixing The Ghost with a malevolent stare at the same time. *Watch your step, I’ve got my eye on you.*

Next Hardy reached up to the storage box on the carriage. From it he took a pair of brass knuckles that he fitted over one leather-gloved hand. Out came

something else: a thick wooden truncheon with a leather loop that he slid over his wrist before slipping the baton into his sleeve. Lastly he produced a knife from somewhere within the folds of his topcoat. He twirled it in his fingers, light dashing down the blade, and all the time he never took his eyes off The Ghost.

Watch your step, I've got my eye on you.

And now the three men considered the house across the road. The shutters were closed, just a dim light burning somewhere within. Otherwise there was no sign of life, except …

The Ghost saw it: a slight disruption of ceiling-shadow glimpsed through the window of the front door. With a hand held out – *wait there* – to the other two, he darted quickly across the road, having to satisfy himself with merely imagining the outraged looks on the men's faces at being given an order by this new recruit. A boy. An *Indian* boy, no less. An outsider.

Stealthily mounting the front steps, he crouched to listen at the front door. From inside he heard voices retreating up an interior passage. He tried the door handle but found it locked and then scuttled back to the Clarence. 'There's somebody in there with her,' he told Marchant and Hardy. 'Sounds like the peelers.'

'Been a long time since I bagged myself a bluebottle,' Hardy said through a wicked smile. Gold glinted malevolently in the dark.

'I would guess that whoever's there is in one of the back rooms,' said The Ghost. 'In the kitchen, perhaps. I say we assess how many before we go rushing in.'

'*Assess*, now, is it?' sneered Hardy. 'How about we do it another way? How about we knock on the door and take them by surprise.' His brass knuckles shone as he performed a quick boxer's one-two, just in case they were in any doubt of exactly what he meant by taking them by surprise.

'We may be outnumbered,' warned The Ghost, turning his attention to Marchant. 'There are only three of us, after all.'

At last the clerk was spurred into a decision. 'Right. Hardy, put those bloody things away before anybody sees them. This is a respectable square. You, Indian, go to the back. Myself and Mr Hardy here will await your signal that it is safe to proceed. Assuming it is, me and Hardy enter by the front, and you can make sure nobody tries to leave from the back. Is that a plan?' The others agreed. The Ghost demonstrated his owl call, and then made off, finding an alleyway that ran through the terrace and darting along it until he came to a door to the grounds of the Waughs' home. The door would be bolted but The Ghost didn't even bother trying it. Instead, with a quick look left and right, he leapt, grabbed an overhang on the wall and nimbly pulled himself to the top.

He crouched there for a moment or so, a dark silhouette against the gunmetal night, enjoying a brief moment of pride in a life that was otherwise shorn of it. He wished he was wearing his robes and could feel the weight of his hidden blade along his forearm but, for the time being, just crouching here would do.

Moment over, he dropped silently to the other side, where he waited in the shrubs and shadows for his vision to adapt to the new, less malevolent darkness. Stretching away from him was a garden – well maintained, evidently there was money to be made in selling these ‘erotic prints’ – while looming to his left was the rear of the house. He made his way there now, guessing from the glow of interior lamps which was the kitchen window, and there he squatted, allowing the night to claim him.

And then – very, very carefully – he peered inside.

Standing in the kitchen with their hats in their hands were two peelers. One was a red-faced plump fellow he didn’t recognize, and the other was Abberline, the constable who’d come to the dig. The Ghost remembered that he’d paid close attention to Waugh’s chest wound. It sounded like a contradiction in terms, but such a clean kill had been careless of Ethan. Abberline’s suspicions had been raised.

Which was probably the reason he was standing in the Waughs’ kitchen right now.

He and his mate were talking to a flustered-looking old maid complete with bonnet and apron, who held a rolling pin like she might be tempted to use it in anger. This was Mrs Waugh, no doubt. The Ghost couldn’t see her mouth to lip-read, but she spoke so loudly he could hear her through the glass anyway.

‘I always said he was getting in too deep there. I always knew he was playing with fire.’

Something caught his eye. There in the kitchen doorway, hidden in the shadows, was a figure The Ghost recognized as Hardy. The Ghost had no idea how he’d got into the house, but the reason why was clear from the wicked glint of the knife he held.

The two constables had their backs to Hardy; they wouldn’t stand a chance. The woman was too busy gesticulating with the rolling pin to see him.

None of them stood a chance.

The Ghost had a second to decide: save the peelers and endanger his mission. Or let them die for the greater good.

28

They rubbed along without too much strife, but even so Abberline and Aubrey weren't exactly crazy about one another. For a start, Abberline thought rather poorly of Aubrey's qualities as a police constable, while for his part Aubrey reckoned Abberline might learn a thing or two about basic human compassion.

Aubrey had returned to the point earlier, as the two of them made their way to the address of Mr and Mrs Waugh on Bedford Square.

'The job's about people too, you know, Freddie,' he told his companion as they threaded through the hustle and bustle of Tottenham Court Road. 'Serving truth and justice is all very well. But what about serving the people?'

'That's what the rules is there for, Aubrey,' Abberline reminded him. 'Rules is for the good of everybody.'

They skirted rival pure-finders who were about to brawl over a particularly sizeable pile of dog shit but stopped when they saw the peelers approaching and made a showy pretence of looking like old pals. Aubrey frowned at them as they passed.

'That's as maybe,' Aubrey said, when they were past and it was safe to exhale. 'Just as long as you don't start putting the rules first and the good of everybody second, is what I'm saying. Besides which, it's not always so cut and dried, is it? After all, if our theory's right, then your man with the gun shot down a little girl in cold blood. Where's the justice in apprehending the man who killed her killer?'

'Well, let's get to the truth of the matter first, shall we? And then we'll question the justice of it all.'

They had reached their destination, a deceptively handsome flat-fronted Georgian house in an appealing square of other deceptively handsome flat-fronted houses. It was just close enough to Tottenham Court Road for the square's no doubt smartly attired residents to reach their offices each day, but far enough away so that the noise of the thoroughfare was a distant hubbub rather than the never-ending clamour that might send a person mad if they had to live on top of it.

The two bobbies stood with their thumbs in their belts regarding the house in question. Shutters at the bay window were closed. A light at the window above the front door was the only sign of life. As they trod the steps to knock, Abberline wondered if Mrs Waugh was inside now, weeping as she pined for her husband …

'Where is he, that bastard?'

Abberline had been correct in one regard. Mrs Waugh was indeed inside the house. When she opened the door it was clear from her flour-covered face that she was mid-baking. But as for weeping and pining?

'Come on,' she demanded of the two peelers on her doorstep. She had the appearance of a well-fed butcher's wife, complete with ruddy complexion and a white apron bearing stains of unknown provenance. 'Where the bloody hell is he?'

'We don't know …' started Abberline, sent off-guard by her ferocity.

It wasn't the best way to begin, and sure enough Mrs Waugh – at least, they assumed it was Mrs Waugh, unless Mr Waugh had an exceptionally bad-tempered and insolent housekeeper – was sent into a spin.

'What do you mean, you don't know where he is? Why are you coming here then? You should be out there, looking for him.' She threw up her hands in frustration and dismay, turned away from the door and stomped off up the hall, muttering to herself as she went, leaving flour footprints on the terracotta tiles.

Abberline and Aubrey looked at one another, Abberline giving Aubrey a look up and down. 'Just your type,' he smiled.

'Oh, give over,' said Aubrey. 'Are we going in or what?'

They closed the door behind them, throwing the bolt before following the sound of feminine distress to the kitchen. There they found her already using a rolling pin to take out her frustration on a vast mound of dough, pounding at it furiously and almost obscured by clouds of flour.

Hanging nearby was a photograph of Mrs Waugh with the man whose body Abberline had lost. *They were in the right place.* Abberline nudged Aubrey in the ribs and gave him a nod.

'Madam,' he began, trying again with what he hoped was a little more composure. 'A man matching your husband's description was seen in the vicinity of the Rookery at the scene of a –'

'Well, he was on his way to the Rookery the night he went missing, so that's about right,' she said, continuing to work at the dough with the rolling pin.

This was the new middle class, mused Abberline. They ate just as well as the high-borns but did it all themselves. Then something occurred to him.

‘What trade was your husband in?’ he asked.

‘He was a photographer,’ she replied in a tone of voice that left them in no doubt what she thought of *that* particular profession.

‘A photographer, eh?’ said Abberline. ‘And what business does a photographer have in the Rookery then?’

Still pounding, she fixed Abberline with a contemptuous look. ‘Are you having me on? How am I supposed to bleeding know what business he has in the Rookery at any sort of hour? He don’t tell me what he’s doing, and to be quite frank with you, I don’t bother asking.’

There was something about her protestations that were a little too theatrical for Abberline’s liking, but he put that to one side for a second. ‘Aren’t you worried about your husband, Mrs Waugh?’

She shrugged. ‘Not especially. How would you feel if your wife went and made herself scarce? You’d probably throw a party, wouldn’t you?’

‘I’m not married.’

‘Well, come back to me when you are and we’ll have this talk again.’

‘All right then. If you’re not worried about him, then how come you reported him missing?’

Indignation made Mrs Waugh’s voice rise, and she was already fairly indignant. ‘Because who’s going to pay for all this if he’s bleedin’ missing?’

‘My point being, Mrs Waugh, that the Rookery is a dangerous place at the best of times and perhaps not somewhere that a respectable photographer like your husband might want to visit.’

‘Well,’ she snapped back, ‘perhaps that’s why he took his barker.’

Abberline and Aubrey shared a look, barely able to believe their ears.

‘He took his gun, did he?’

‘That’s what I said.’

‘Yes, except, Mrs Waugh, the man matching your husband’s description who was seen in the vicinity of the Rookery may or may not have been involved in a shooting.’

Now at last she set down the rolling pin. ‘I see,’ she said gravely.

‘It would be a great help to us if you could tell us what your husband might have been doing in the Rookery. What was the purpose of his visit? Was he there to meet somebody for example? Apart from his barker did he take anything with him? Did he tell you what time to expect him back?’

She ignored all the questions. Pinning Abberline with her gaze, she said, ‘This shooting that occurred. Was anybody hurt?’

‘There were two confirmed fatalities, Mrs Waugh. A little girl –’ he watched as the woman winced, closing her eyes, absorbing the pain – ‘and a street thug

who went by the name of Boot.'

She opened her eyes again. 'Boot? Robert was on his way to meet Boot. As far as I know, Boot was a business associate.'

'I'm sorry, I thought you just said he never told you about his business and you never asked?'

'Well, I picked up the odd thing, didn't I? Any road up, he was on his way there for some kind of deal …'

'A deal?'

Her eyes darted. She had already said too much. 'Yes, well, he's a photographer. He …'

'… takes pictures,' said Abberline. 'Yes, that's what photographers do. Photographers take pictures of men and their wives and the children of men and their wives. Big crinolines, buffed-up boots, buttoned-up jackets and uncomfortably starched collars, grim and forbidding looks into the camera, all that kind of thing. That's what photographers do. They don't do deals in slums with street thugs after dark.'

'Wait a second, you haven't said yet – if there were two confirmed deaths, does that mean Robert's still alive?'

Again, Abberline and Aubrey shared a look. 'I'm afraid our most likely theory at the moment is that your husband may have been killed by a second assailant. In fact, I was wondering if you have a photograph of him, so I can confirm if his body was found at the Metropolitan line dig in the north.'

Him asking was a formality so he could break the news, but it was at the mention of the Metropolitan line that a dark look passed across her face. 'Oh, lummy,' she said, shaking her head with the terrible inevitability of it all. 'I always said he was getting in too deep there. I always knew he was playing with fire.'

Trying to contain his excitement, and as far as Police Constable Aubrey Shaw was concerned not succeeding in the slightest, Abberline leapt on her words. 'What do you mean "too deep". Tell me exactly what you know, Mrs Waugh …'

The Waughs' kitchen window was tall and as black as night, like a stained-glass window without the stained glass. As Mrs Waugh looked at him, about to speak, something there caught Abberline's eye.

And a second later the window exploded.

29

There was a split second of indecision before The Ghost decided he couldn't have the blood of two innocent peelers on his hands, and he made his move.

In the end he gambled on two things: his own marksmanship, and Mrs Waugh making enough noise to wake the dead.

He was not disappointed in either respect.

Two objectives: to save the peelers and to prevent them from seeing either him, Marchant or Hardy. He cast around for a stone, found a large pebble fringing a flower bed nearby and slipped it into his palm, and then, as he saw Hardy tense and the silver blade rise in the doorway, he made his move.

The Ghost wore only rags, nothing to protect him from the glass, so when he hit the window at full force he felt what seemed like a thousand knife cuts as he crashed through glass and splintered wood and to a crockery table on the other side.

A single lamp hung from the ceiling, the only light source in the room, and The Ghost let fly with his pebble at the same time as he crashed through the window and his aim was true and the light blinked out and night fell like swift death in the room at exactly the same time as a shout went up and Mrs Waugh started screaming.

Dislodged crockery fell and smashed and added to the din but The Ghost was already on the move, and he propelled himself to a draining board, going round Mrs Waugh to the peelers by traversing the room without touching the floor, like the games children play – like a game he himself had played at home in Amritsar. Another jump from the draining board took him to the peelers, neither of whom saw or heard him or had time to react, as he landed on the tiles just in front of them, and delivered two quick throat-punches, felling first Abberline, and then his companion, all done in a matter of half a second, and all done to the accompaniment of screams from Mrs Waugh.

It was over in a trice. Nobody but The Ghost knew what was happening and that suited the young man fine. Confusion was his friend.

'Grab her,' he commanded. Hardy and Marchant had come barging into the room and The Ghost saw the fury of denial on Hardy's face. 'Grab her before

she brings other rozzers running.’

Then Marchant was barking orders like he was a man in charge and not a man who was hopelessly confused about a situation that had spun irretrievably out of his control. ‘You heard him. Grab her! Blooming well shut her up!’ And perhaps grateful for the chance to carry out a little violence, Hardy strode across the room to where Mrs Waugh stood screaming, and The Ghost saw the flash of brass knuckles and he turned his head away as Mrs Waugh’s screams abruptly stopped.

It took all three of them to carry her out of the house and bundle her in the Clarence. The Ghost made sure he was the last to leave, and closed the front door behind him.

In the house an icy wind blew through the smashed window of the kitchen. On the floor the two peelers lay out cold.

30

It was a day of recrimination.

The name Bharat Singh came bouncing down the shaft and into the tunnel, and The Ghost once again scaled the ladders and made his way across the planks to the office. There sat Cavanagh, just as he had the day before, and there stood Marchant, Hardy, Smith and Other Hardy, just as they had the day before.

Only things were different now. Where yesterday Hardy had looked at The Ghost with curiosity at best, now he gazed at him with unmasked hatred; Marchant too regarded him with new interest.

'I have some important news for you, young Bharat,' said Cavanagh with hooded eyes. 'You are to be promoted. No more working in the tunnel. No more labouring in the trench. From now on you will work under Marchant here, putting your reading and writing skills to good use. Congratulations, you have achieved everything your father would have wanted.'

It was a fictional father's admiration that Cavanagh mocked, but that didn't stop The Ghost feeling a twinge of something approaching pure hatred for him.

'You may ask why,' continued Cavanagh. 'Why have you been promoted? It appears from talking to Mrs Waugh that everything you told us was correct. And as I'm sure you are already aware, Mr Smith here recovered a photographic plate from your hole at the Thames Tunnel. Therefore, your first task is to carry out the sentence of death on the treacherous Mr Waugh. Only, of course, that sentence has already been carried out, and you have proved yourself in my eyes.'

The Ghost nodded. 'Thank you, sir. What of my victim's widow?'

'She's been taken care of.'

The Ghost kept his face blank but chalked up one more innocent.

Meanwhile, from behind him, Hardy cleared his throat.

Cavanagh acknowledged him, turning his attention to The Ghost. 'Mr Hardy here feels aggrieved about your actions last night. Neither seem quite sure what happened.' At this he looked hard at Marchant and then at Hardy. 'But both are agreed that you acted impulsively and put them at risk.'

The Ghost opened his mouth, about to defend himself.

‘But …’ Cavanagh held out a hand to stop him. ‘I happen to disagree with Mr Marchant and Mr Hardy. We had a body discovered at the dig, which raises questions. The last thing we need is two dead constables as well. There are only a certain amount of questions we can withstand. You, Mr Hardy, should know better.’

‘That’s as may be,’ growled Hardy, ‘but the lad went rogue. It was agreed that Mr Marchant and me would take the kitchen and he would stop anybody leaving from the rear. He smashed through a bloody window, guv. It wasn’t exactly stealthy, know what I mean?’

Cavanagh gave a thin smile. ‘Something tells me our newest employee knew exactly what he was doing.’

31

Abberline and Aubrey had pulled themselves from the floor of the Waughs' kitchen, made their way back to the station with pounding heads and their tails tucked firmly between their legs, and then bedded down for the night.

Bedraggled, pained and still exhausted, they found themselves at the front desk not long after dawn, when the alarm was raised. A woman had rushed in screaming about a suicide.

'Where?'

'House on Bedford Square …'

And they'd looked at one another, a mirror image of slack-jawed shock, and then both bolted for the door.

Less than half an hour later they were back in the very same kitchen they'd left in the early hours. On their departure it had been dark, with wind gusting through the smashed window, the terracotta tiles crunchy with broken glass, and a dropped rolling pin on the floor.

Now, though, it was light, and everything was just as it had been the previous night with the exception of one thing: Mrs Waugh had returned. She was hanging from the ceiling lamp, a noose fashioned from linen tight round her neck, head lolling, tongue protruding from blue lips and a puddle of urine on the tiles beneath her dangling boots.

Nobody likes to see a dead body before their elevenses, thought Abberline, and he turned on his heel and marched out.

'They piss themselves, you know!'

Cavanagh, Marchant, the punishers and The Ghost were still in the office when Abberline and Aubrey announced their presence with a loud, not-to-be-denied, we-are-the-peelers knock, clomped inside and started talking about people pissing themselves.

Aubrey was as red-faced as ever, but anger had given Abberline an expression to match, and he glowered from man to man, his eyes alighting finally on The Ghost. 'You,' he snapped, 'where did you get those cuts?'

‘Mr Singh is a labourer, constable,’ broke in Cavanagh, before The Ghost could answer, ‘and I’m afraid his English isn’t very good, but he suffered an accident in the trench last night.’

Cavanagh made no effort to be charming or ingratiating with Abberline. He simply stated facts. At the same time he indicated to Other Hardy, who turned to leave.

‘Where do you think you’re going?’ Abberline barked, wheeling on Other Hardy.

‘He’s going where I say he goes, or where he likes, or maybe even to your own station, should he so desire to speak to a sergeant there … Unless of course you plan to place him under arrest, in which case I’m sure we’re all interested to hear on what charge, and what compelling evidence you have to support it?’

Abberline spluttered, lost for words. He hadn’t been sure how this would go, but one thing was for sure, he didn’t picture it going like this.

‘Now, you were saying … about people pissing themselves?’ said Cavanagh drily. ‘Which people would this be, exactly?’

‘Those who find themselves at the end of a noose,’ spat Abberline.

‘Suicides?’

‘Not just toppers, no, but murders too. Anywhere you find a poor soul at the end of a noose you find some effluent not far away. The bowels open, you see.’ He paused for effect. ‘Lucky for Mrs Waugh that she didn’t need number twos.’

His gaze went around the room: unreadable Cavanagh, sly Marchant, the three punishers seemingly having the time of their lives, and … the Indian.

Abberline’s gaze lingered on the Indian the longest, and he could swear he saw something there, a flicker of emotion, and not an emotion out of the gutter, either, but a proper one. The kind that Aubrey was always saying he himself could do with learning.

Abberline removed his eyes slowly from the Indian, taking them instead to the big guy, the punisher with the gold tooth.

‘You,’ he said. ‘It was you, wasn’t it? You was at the house.’

The man, ‘Hardy’ if Abberline remembered correctly, displayed his golden dentistry as well as some other splendid specimens. ‘No, I was here all night, Mr Blue Bottle, as Mr Cavanagh will confirm.’

‘You just blooming watch yer sauce-box, you …’ said Abberline, pointing at Hardy.

‘Yes, Mr Hardy,’ sighed Cavanagh, ‘perhaps it might be wise *not* to excite our visitor here any more than he is already excited. And as for you, constable, may I reiterate that Mr Singh, Mr Hardy, Marchant, Smith and Other Hardy were all with me last night and, ah … Abberline, it appears you have a visitor.’

‘Abberline,’ the constable heard from behind him, and cringed at the distinctive sound of his sergeant’s voice. ‘Just what the bloody hell do you think you’re playing at?’

32

Furious, Abberline stepped out into the noise of the tunnel works, with Aubrey at his heels, struggling to keep up.

‘Hold up, hold up, where are you bleedin’ going?’ yelled his red-faced companion over the never-ending din of machinery.

‘Back to Bedford Square is where I’m bleeding going!’ Abberline roared back over his shoulder. He reached the wooden gate at the perimeter of the site, yanked it open and brushed past a sleepy navvy whose job it was to keep the riff-raff out. ‘This lot are into it right up to their eyeballs. The stink of it, I’m telling you.’

Outside in the street they weaved their way through the human detritus that was either attracted by the commercial possibilities of the dig – traders, hawkers, prostitutes, pickpockets – or genuinely had business in that part of town, and began the short hike back to the home of the unfortunate Mr and Mrs Waugh.

‘What do you think it is they’re up to their necks in?’ Aubrey held on to his hat as he tried to keep up with Abberline.

‘I don’t know that, do I? If I knew that then life would be a lot bloody simpler, wouldn’t it?’ He stopped, turned and raised a finger like an admonishing schoolmaster. ‘But I tell you this, Aubrey Shaw. They’re up to something.’ He shook the self-same finger in the direction of the fenced-off rail works. ‘And whatever it is they’re up to, it’s no good. You hear me?’ He returned to his marching. ‘I mean, did you see them all, stood there, guilty as you like? And that young fella, the Indian bloke. Blood all over him. Accident in the tunnel, my fat arse. He got all cut up when he came through Mrs Waugh’s window.’

‘You think that was him?’

‘*Of course* I think it was him!’ exploded Abberline. ‘I know it was him. *I* know it was him. *They* know it was him. Even *you* know it was him. Proving it is the bloody problem, but it was him all right. He came through the window, knocked out the light and then knocked us out.’

Aubrey had drawn level, speaking through gulps as he tried to catch his breath. ‘Do you realize what you’ve just said, Freddie? I mean, isn’t that where

this theory of yours falls down? Because there ain't no way he could have done all that. He'd have to be some kind of acrobat or something.'

By now they were back at Bedford Square, like they'd never left, and Abberline strode inside while Aubrey stood in the doorway, one hand on the frame, almost doubled over as he tried to catch his breath.

From the kitchen came the sounds of Abberline muttering and then an exclamation.

'What is it?' said Aubrey, holding his side as he joined the other peeler in the kitchen.

Abberline stood at the far end of the room beneath the comprehensively broken window. Triumphantly he indicated the disturbed crockery table.

'Here,' he said, 'what do you see here?'

Whatever it was he was pointing out looked very much to Aubrey like a smudge of blood, and he said so.

'Right, a bloodstain left by whoever it was who dived through the window, right? You'd expect that, wouldn't you?'

'Well, yes.'

'Blood from that Indian geezer we've just seen standing in Cavanagh's office like butter wouldn't melt, I would wager,' said Abberline.

'That's an assumption, Freddie. Haven't we always been taught to look for evidence, never assume, look for evidence.'

'How about if you formulate theories then find the evidence to back it up?' asked Abberline with a glint in his eye.

You had to give it to him, thought Aubrey. When he was on a roll … 'Go on …' he said.

'See the Indian geezer? He had bare feet, didn't he?'

'I know. Bloody hell, must save a few bob on boot leather …'

'Bear that fact in mind, and now take another look at your smudge of blood.'

Aubrey did as he was told and Abberline watched as the light slowly dawned on his companion's face.

'Christ almighty, you're right; it's a footprint.'

'That's right. That's bloody right, Aubrey. A footprint. Now look, you and I was standing over here.' He pulled the other man over to where they were the previous evening, when they'd been remonstrating with the permanently indignant Mrs Waugh. 'Now, you have to imagine the window is intact. That makes it like a mirror, right? Like a black mirror. Well, I'm telling you, about half a second before that black mirror smashed and seven years of bad luck came in at us all at once, I saw a movement in it.'

'You saw the assailant before he came smashing through?'

‘Except now we think the Indian geezer was the assailant, don’t we? But it wasn’t the Indian geezer I saw. Who I saw was much bigger than that. So now I’m wondering … now I’m wondering if what I saw was a reflection.’ He pressed a hand to his forehead as though to try to massage a solution out of his brain. ‘All right, what about this, Aubrey? What if one or maybe even two of those security geezers from the rail works were standing behind us? What would you say to that?’

‘I’d say we bolted the door, so how did they get in?’

‘Here.’ Abberline dragged Aubrey out of the kitchen and towards the coal-cellar entrance. It was ajar. Nothing suspicious about that. But inside the cellar the coal had a distinct man-sized groove running through its middle, from the stone floor of the coal hole, right up to the hatch at street level.

‘Gotcha!’ exclaimed Abberline, ‘Now …’ He returned Aubrey to the kitchen where they resumed their positions. ‘We’re standing here, right? Now, say if we’re right and I saw the reflection of a bludger stood right behind us, just waiting to cold-cock us. I saw how close he was. And we had our backs to him, don’t forget. What I’m saying is that he had us, Aubrey. He had us, Aubrey, like a pair of sitting ducks, fattened up and ready for the slaughter. Could have knocked our block off with a truncheon. Could have slit our throats with a knife … And yet, for some reason, even though his mate was in position, the Indian fellow comes crashing through the window.’

Abberline looked at Aubrey.

‘Now why would that be, Aubrey? What the bloody hell was he doing coming in through the window?’

Part Two

Lost City

33

Fifteen-year-old Evie Frye, the daughter of Ethan and the late Cecily, had developed a new habit. She wasn't especially proud of it, but still it had developed anyway, as habits have a habit of doing. What it was, she had taken to listening at her father's door during his meetings with George Westhouse.

Well, why not? After all, wasn't her father always saying she'd soon be joining 'the fight', as he called it? And wasn't another of his favoured expressions that there's no time like the present?

For years now Evie and her twin brother, Jacob, had been learning Assassincraft, and the two of them were enthusiastic students. Jacob, the more athletic of the pair, had taken to combat like a fish to water; he loved it, despite lacking the natural gift that his sister possessed. At nights the siblings would talk excitedly of the day when they would be introduced to the fabled hidden blade.

Nevertheless, Evie found her interest wandering. What came naturally to her didn't quite engross her the way it did her brother. While Jacob would spend his days in the yard of their home in Crawley, whirling like a dervish to practise moves taught by their father that morning, Evie would often creep away, declaring herself bored of the constant repetition of sword practice, and make her way to her father's study, where he kept his books.

Learning, that was what fired the imagination of Evie Frye. The writings of Assassin elders, chronicles of legendary Assassins: Altaïr Ibn-La'Ahad, whose name means 'the flying eagle', the handsome and dashing Ezio Auditore da Firenze, Edward Kenway, Arno Dorian, Adéwalé, Aveline de Grandpré and, of course, Arbaaz Mir, with whom her father had spent so much time when they were younger men.

All of them had joined the struggle to hold the Templar scourge at bay, fighting for freedom in whatever time and territory they plied their trade; most had at one time or another become involved in helping to locate what were known as artefacts. No museum pieces, these. The artefacts that preoccupied Assassins and Templars were materials left by Those Who Came Before. Of them all, the most important were the Pieces of Eden. The power they harnessed was said to be biblical and the knowledge supposedly coded into them was said

to be the learning of all ages: past, present and future. There were some, Altaïr Ibn-La'Ahad, for example – Evie had pored over a transcription of his codex – who had expressed doubt about them, wondering if they were mere trinkets. Evie wasn't sure, and perhaps that formed part of the appeal. She wanted to see these artefacts for herself. She wanted to hold them and feel a connection with a society that existed before her own. She wanted to know the unknowable powers that helped shape mankind.

Thus, when she overheard the word 'artefacts' from inside her father's study one night, she had lingered to listen further. And then the next time George Westhouse visited, and then the time after that.

Sometimes she asked herself if Father knew there were eavesdroppers present. It would be just like him to say nothing. What mitigated her guilt was the feeling that he wouldn't *necessarily* disapprove. After all, she was merely harvesting early the information she'd be gathering later.

'He's a brave one, this man of yours,' George Westhouse was saying now.

'Indeed he is. And essential to any chance we have of one day taking back our city. The Templars believe us to be reduced, George. Let them think that. Having an agent in their midst gives us a crucial advantage.'

'Only if he learns something of use to us. Has he?'

Evie's father sighed. 'Sadly not. We know that Cavanagh is regularly visited by Crawford, and in particular we know that Lucy Thorne spends a great deal of time at the dig …'

'Lucy Thorne's presence at the site indicates we're on the right track.'

'Indeed. I never doubted it.'

'But there's nothing to suggest when the Templars hope to find what they're looking for?'

'Not yet, but when they do, The Ghost is in place to snatch it for us.'

'And if they already have?'

'Then at some point, as he continues to gain their trust, he will learn that and, again, be in the right place to retrieve the artefact and put it into our hands.'

From behind Evie came a whisper. 'What are you doing there?'

Startled and straightening with a slight cracking of her legs, Evie turned to find Jacob behind her, grinning, as usual. She put a finger to her lips then ushered him away from the door and to the stairs so they could retire for bed.

Evie would tell Jacob what she had learnt, knowing full well that for all he would insist on every little detail he wouldn't really bother listening. Assassin history, tactics, policy, the artefacts – these were all aspects of the Assassin life that Jacob was happy to leave for a later date, when their father was good and ready to teach them.

Not for Evie, though. Evie was thirsty to learn.

34

Months had passed since the events at the Waughs' home, and during those months Abberline had brooded. Occasionally he brooded alone. Occasionally he had help in the form of Aubrey who, while not quite as brooding as Abberline, did a little out of sympathy, as well as being glad of an ale or two in the Green Man.

During these occasions, despondently hunched over a table in the pub and trying not to stand out like two skiving bobbies, Aubrey would attempt to lighten the mood with one of the best new music-hall jokes.

'I say, I say, I say, Freddie, when is a boat smaller than a bonnet?'

'I don't know. When is a boat smaller than a bonnet?'

'When it's capsized.'

And sometimes he would try to lighten the mood with one of the worst.

'I say, I say, I say, Freddie. Why do tailors always please their customers?'

'I don't know, why?'

'Because it is their business to suit people.'

And other times he would try to engage Abberline in more profound and philosophical discussion.

'It's just one of those things,' he said one day.

'But it's not, though, is it?' Abberline, who had long since forgone his no-drinking-on-duty rule, drained the rest of his pint. 'If it was just one of those things I wouldn't be so bothered. Because you know what really irks me, Aubrey? It's the not knowing. It's the fact that liars and murderers are walking around out there, thinking they got one over on the peelers. No, what am I talking about? Not the peelers, because no bugger else apart from you and me could give two hoots about robed men and missing bodies. Thinking they got one over on you and me, is what it is.'

Aubrey shook his head sadly. 'You know what your problem is, Freddie? You want everything to be black and white. You want answers all the time. And sometimes, you know, there just ain't no answers, and there ain't no black and white; there's just different shades of grey, which is to say that things are as murky as the bottom of the Thames and just as rotten-smelling, but there ain't

nothing you can do about the Thames and there ain't nothing you can do about that either.'

'No, you're wrong.' Abberline stopped himself and reconsidered. 'Well, all right, maybe you're only half right. There are shades of grey when it comes to right and wrong. I'll give you that and stand you a pint for your insights.' He held up two fingers and was rewarded with a response from across the room. 'But you're wrong about answers. There *are* answers. And I want to know those answers.'

Aubrey nodded, tried to dredge up another joke, but the only one he could think of was one with the punchline, 'No noose is good noose', and he didn't think that was appropriate in the circumstances. So instead they drank their next pint in silence, and did some more brooding.

Outside they went their separate ways along Regent Street, and Abberline wondered if a man from the pub, who had seemed to be taking an inordinate interest in them, would follow either him or Aubrey.

Glancing in the reflection of a shop window, he saw that he was the lucky one.

35

‘So, how about you tell me why you’ve been following me these past few days?’

It was an especially vexed Abberline who had led his shadow up an alleyway on the New Road in order to confront him. Especially vexed because that very morning he had been called into the division sergeant’s office and given a telling-off. No, not just a telling-off, but a right old bollocking. And why? Because apparently a certain Mr Cavanagh of the Metropolitan Railway – that dead-eyed bastard – had made a complaint about him. According to him, Constable Abberline was spending a disproportionate amount of time at the site. Making something of a nuisance of himself, he was, what with his insinuations that Cavanagh and five of his employees were involved with a murder.

And he was to stop that at once.

So, yes, an especially vexed Abberline, given strength by his vexation was watching the man’s face turn purple above the blue serge of his forearm. The man wore a dark suit and a bowler hat, a little tatty, but otherwise fairly respectable-looking. In fact, thought Abberline, he was dressed not unlike one of the detectives from the division.

Except Abberline knew all the detectives from the division. He knew all the detectives for miles around, and this pillock wasn’t one of them. Which had made him wonder if it was a different kind of detective altogether. With his other hand he frisked the man and came up with a small leather truncheon that he slipped into his own tunic pocket.

‘Private dick, are we?’ said Abberline.

In response the man nodded furiously. ‘Gak, gak, gak,’ he tried to say.

Abberline relaxed his grip.

‘Yes, Constable Abberline, a private detective is what I am, and one who might be of benefit to you, if you were to let me speak,’ gasped the man against the wall.

Cautious but curious, Abberline let him go. ‘What’s your name?’ he demanded.

‘Leonard. Leonard Hazlewood.’

‘Right, now state your case, Mr Hazlewood, and make it a good one.’

Hazlewood straightened himself up first, adjusting his hat and his suit and his collar before he went on. ‘You’re right, I’m a private detective in the employ of a member of the aristocracy, a viscount, if you please, who pays well and doesn’t mind who he pays it to, if you know what I mean.’

‘Yes, I know exactly what you mean. How about I take you in for attempting to bribe a member of Her Majesty’s constabulary?’

‘Who’s bribing anyone, constable? I know my business, and I know that the other men at the division call you Fresh-faced Freddie, and that you like to do things by the book, and that you don’t even take a drink on duty …’

Abberline cleared his throat guiltily. *Yeah, mate, if only you knew.* ‘What of it?’

‘So I reckon you’d be just as interested in solving a crime as you would be in lining your own pocket. Maybe even more so. And that if I can help you do the one, while maybe also doing the other, then maybe that isn’t a bribe so much as a gift in recognition of your sterling police work, such as a benefactor might bestow.’

‘Just say what you have to say and say it outright.’

‘This viscount of mine, him and his mate were set upon not far from here, in the Marylebone churchyard. His mate was so viciously attacked that he lost his life there.’

‘He didn’t have far to travel for his burial then, did he?’

‘A somewhat off-colour joke, if you don’t mind my saying so, constable.’

‘It’s an off-colour joke because I know a load of codswallop when I hear it, and I’m hearing it now. If two members of the aristocracy had been set upon in a graveyard and one of them killed right here in the division, I think I’d have known about it, don’t you?’

‘Both my employer and the family of the murdered man preferred not to report the matter, in a bid to keep it out of the public spotlight.’

Abberline curled a lip. ‘Oh yes? Up to no good, were they?’

‘I didn’t ask. I’ve simply been appointed to find and detain their attacker.’

‘Detain, is it? And then what? Deliver him into the hands of the police? Don’t make me laugh. Do him down or top him completely is what you’ve got in mind.’

Hazlewood pulled a face. ‘Does it matter? The fact is that justice will be served.’

‘Justice is served by the courts,’ said Abberline – although these days he wondered if he still believed it.

‘Not always.’

‘You’re right. Not always. Not on young nobles who get drunk, take a trollop or two into a graveyard and then find themselves being rolled over by the ladies’ pimps, am I right? I mean, unless you’re trying to tell me they was in there putting poppies on a grave? One thing you can always depend on the aristocracy to do is get their jollies at the expense of the lower orders. Maybe the tables got turned for once.’

The detective shrugged. ‘It wasn’t a pimp. No simple cash carrier attacked my employer and killed his friend and disabled two of his bodyguards …’

Abberline’s eyebrows shot up. ‘They had *bodyguards*, eh? Bloody hell, you really know how to play on a man’s sympathies you do, don’t you?’

Hazlewood frowned and tugged at his collar again. His neck had reddened. This wasn’t going well. ‘This was a dangerous man, constable. Hardly even a man, they say. And it would be in all of our best interests if he were to be off the streets for good.’

Abberline was thinking of Aubrey’s different shades of grey. He was thinking about justice and how that fitted into the picture when two aristocrats took bodyguards for drunken jaunts into the less salubrious parts of town. Why should he care if a lone man taught the bastards a lesson by giving them a good hiding? In other words a right *batty fang*. Abberline knew what Aubrey would say. Good luck to the fella. More power to his bloody elbow.

For maybe the first time ever Abberline found not that he didn’t care, but that him caring was in abnormally short supply. He chuckled. ‘And tell me, what did he look like, this man who was not even a man? I’ll keep an eye out for … what? A monster, perhaps? Six-feet tall and armed to his jagged pointy teeth, with talons for hands and a roar to split the night?’

The private detective rolled his eyes. ‘If I didn’t know better I’d say you’d been drinking, constable. No, when I say not quite a man, I don’t mean *more* than one, I mean a young lad.’

‘A young lad?’

‘That’s right. An Indian boy with bare feet. And they say he fought like the devil. Quite the acrobat, he was.’

Abberline looked at him, suddenly serious as everything else fell away and all other considerations were sidelined.

‘An acrobat, you say?’

36

The next day, The Ghost stood by the shaft, overseeing the work. He clutched laced-up files full of dockets, manifests, schedules and work rotas to his chest – Marchant had offloaded almost every aspect of his clerk's work on to The Ghost – and tending to them all was proving more taxing than anything he could remember doing ever, and that included learning the finer points of the kukri with Ethan Frye.

One of the foremen approached, wiping his nose on his sleeve. 'Shall I toll for the shift change, Mr Singh?'

The Ghost looked at him without seeing, trying to focus on words he wasn't used to hearing, specifically the words 'Mr Singh'.

'Oh, yes,' he said at last. 'Thank you.' And then he watched as the foreman touched a hand to his forelock and stepped away, still not quite accustomed to this sudden change of events. 'Indian' was what they called him, the men, up until he started at his new post. But now … Mister Singh. It had *respect* – power, even. Because, yes, what was respect, if not a kind of power? For the first time in his life The Ghost could understand its allure and the constant pursuit of it. For with power came money and influence and perhaps most importantly it meant being heard, and these things were as seductive as love, friendship and family, probably more so, because they spoke to selfish ego rather than the gentle heart.

Yes, he'd allowed himself to think, *I could, in another world, get used to being called Mr Singh. I could come to truly enjoy that.*

Indeed, he had no choice, what with his new exalted position at the dig.

Through Marchant, Cavanagh had insisted The Ghost smarten up. Hardy had handed him a brown-paper bundle. 'Here you go, mate, some new kecks and boots, a shirt and a jacket for you. Hat in there too, if you want it.' That night at the tunnel The Ghost had tried on his new ensemble for Maggie's approval.

'Well, what a swell, you look quite the man about town,' she told him when he was all togged up. 'You'll have all the ladies after you – if they're not already.'

The Ghost smiled and Maggie felt her heart open at the sight of that smile, just as it had on the night they had met, and now, just as she had then, she thought to

herself, *If only I were forty years younger …*

In the event, The Ghost had done away with the hat. He never much liked his railwayman's cap. He'd give it to someone further up the tunnel. The trousers were way too short, and The Ghost thought this was probably Hardy's evil trick. But the punisher would have been disappointed to know that the shorter trousers, flapping just above the ankle, suited The Ghost just fine. He gave the boots to Maggie. She gleefully tore out the laces before putting them on. Her old ones she'd pass to another tunnel dweller.

And the next day he went back to the site, literally a changed man.

The work was demanding. All his time was spent scratching out names and numbers on the various schedules Marchant presented to him, as well as keeping up with the constantly changing shifts or liaising with the many foremen, some of whom had taken 'Indian's appointment' better than others. Interestingly, he'd found that a sharp but soft word accompanied by a glance to the office was enough to set any recalcitrant foreman straight. It wasn't respect that ruled, he knew. It was fear.

Nevertheless, his primary purpose of being here was not to ruminate on ideology or learn new workplace skills. It was to spy on behalf of the Brotherhood, to ascertain exactly what the Templars were up to, and in that regard he'd been slightly less successful. For a start his new work kept him busy; secondly, he rarely had an excuse to visit the office where the plans were kept.

One day he had looked up from his vantage point by the cranes to see Crawford Starrick and Lucy Thorne arrive, the two of them picking their way across the mudflats before disappearing inside.

Now's the time, he had thought, and trod across the mud to the office on the pretext of delivering some dockets – only to be stopped by Smith and Other Hardy, the two punishers guarding the portal to the inner sanctum. They'd taken the documents from him and sent him away. The Ghost's introduction to Cavanagh's immediate circle was only theoretical, it seemed. Perhaps they were still testing him; indeed, not long after that day was an incident that The Ghost was still puzzling over.

It came one late afternoon when The Ghost approached Marchant on the mudflats. Shouting to make himself heard over the racket of a steam engine laden with spoil, he had tried to hand the site manager the rota, just as he did at the end of every shift.

'All in order, sir,' he said, indicating the hive of industry behind him: men were swarming on the cranes, buckets of earth swinging black against the grey dwindling light of the day, filthy-faced navvies with spades and pickaxes slung

over their shoulders leaving the trench like defeated men on a retreat. The conveyor rattling, always rattling.

But on this occasion, instead of taking the rota as he would have done normally, Marchant shrugged and indicated the wooden site office behind them.

'In there,' he said. 'Leave it on the side near the plans table. I'll look at it later.'

His eyes betrayed nothing. The Ghost nodded assent and made his way across. There was no Cavanagh. No Hardy, Smith, or Other Hardy. There was just The Ghost stepping into the office, the heart of the operation, alone.

He stopped himself. This was a test. This was surely a test. Conscious that Marchant might be timing him, he lit a lamp, then moved over to the plans table.

Marchant had been very specific about that. The plans table.

And sure enough, there, rolled up on the plans table, were the plans.

Placing the lamp on the tabletop, The Ghost bent to inspect the rolled-up document. If it was a trap as he suspected then this is how it would be laid, and … *there*, he saw it. A single black hair had been left rolled into the plans, just the tip of it protruding. His heart hammering, he plucked the hair out between his fingernails, and then, praying it would be the only trap they had set, unrolled them.

There in front of him, were the designs for the excavation and the building of the railway, but not the official designs. Those he had seen, craning over the heads of fellow workmen as Charles Pearson and John Fowler gave presentations on their baby. Those plans looked exactly like these but for one vital difference. They had the crest of the Metropolitan Railway in the top right-hand corner. This set sported the crest of the Knights Templar.

Marchant would be wondering where he was. Quickly he scanned the drawings in front of him, eyes immediately going to a section of the dig – in fact, the section they were currently digging. Here was a shaded circle. Inside that shaded circle was another smaller Templar cross.

The Ghost rolled up the plans, replaced the hair, extinguished the lamp and left the office. As he went with the image of the plans fresh in his mind, his thoughts went back to the events of a few days ago, when boxes had been brought and a makeshift stage built. Cavanagh had taken to it, with Marchant and the punishers standing at the hem of his coat, and through a speaking trumpet had gone on to regretfully announce that there had been some instances of theft from the site, that men's tools had been stolen.

This had elicited a gasp. The men cared about their tools as much as they did their families. More so, in many cases. The Ghost had long since been in the habit of burying his own spade at a spot on the perimeter of the dig, but for many

men their spades and pickaxes weren't just the means of their livelihood, they were symbolic of it. When they walked through the streets with the tools of their trade over their shoulders they walked tall with their heads held high, and passers-by knew they were in the presence of a hard-working man, rather than just a dirty one. Thus, the idea that some wretch was stealing tools, well, this fellow might as well have been stealing the food from out of their mouths. Cavanagh had the men wrapped round his little finger, and his proposal that workers would be searched as they left the site from now on was therefore met with fewer than expected grumbles. Shift changes now took three times longer but at least the men could be reassured that the Metropolitan Railway had their best interests at heart.

The Ghost hadn't been fooled, but now he knew exactly what lay behind the decision. It was because the excavation had finally reached the shaded circle. The end was in sight and though the men were under strict orders to report any unusual finds – with the promise of a reward to match the value of anything precious – there was still a possibility that one of the labourers might simply purloin what he found. Chances were the Templars were as clueless about this artefact as the Assassins were. They were taking no chances.

And then, of course, there was the other issue, the small matter of the persistent Police Constable Abberline, who had been turning up at the works and, according to Marchant, making accusations against him. 'Don't you worry,' Marchant had told The Ghost. 'We've got you covered.' The implication was that them 'having him covered' came with a price.

He would see to it that he repaid them. Yes, he would repay them.

But now Abberline had returned, and with him was a consortium, two of whom he recognized – the other peeler, Aubrey, and the division sergeant – and two he didn't – a smartly dressed man who had a habit of tugging at his collar, and a fourth man, who …

There was something about this fourth man that The Ghost recognized. He looked closer now, feeling as though his brain was moving too slowly as he tried to place him …

Marchant was walking towards him, coming closer, hailing him with a weasel grin. 'Oi, you're needed over here …'

And still The Ghost was staring at the new arrival, who had stood slightly apart from the group and was looking right back at him. As their eyes met, they recognized one another.

He was the bodyguard from the graveyard.

37

Abberline watched him come.

That morning he had stormed into the sergeant's office, with his new friend Hazlewood the private detective in tow, and told the sergeant that he had something new on the Indian at the dig.

'Tell him that what you told me,' he insisted to Hazlewood, who wore an expression that seemed to indicate things were quickly moving away from him, like this wasn't the way he had planned it. One minute, trading confidences with a contact who might be of use in finding this Indian fellow, the next being hauled before the division sergeant by an excitable Abberline.

Sure enough, the sergeant looked him up and down before returning his attention to Abberline. 'And who the bloody hell is this, Freddie?'

'He's a private detective, is what he is. He's a private detective who happens to have information regarding our friends at the rail works.'

'Oh not the bloody rail works,' sighed the sergeant. 'Please not the bloody rail works, *again*.'

'Now hold on, hold on a minute.' Hazlewood had his hands held out to Abberline and the sergeant like a man trying to control a small crowd. 'I've been asked to locate a young thug involved in a brutal attack on a member of the aristocracy who wishes to see justice served. I don't know anything about any goings-on at the rail works.'

'One and the same, mate, one and the same,' Abberline reassured him. 'Now just tell him what you told me before I do it, and, believe you me, I ain't leaving anything out and I may even add a few bits and pieces that won't reflect at all well on either you or your employers.'

The detective shot him a furious look and then directed himself to the sergeant. 'As I was telling the –' he paused, for extra contempt – '*constable* here, I have been employed by a high-ranking gentleman in order to help apprehend a very dangerous man.'

'*A very dangerous man*,' spoofed Abberline. 'That's a matter of opinion. You say that there was another bodyguard there, apart from the two in the sanitorium?'

‘There was.’

‘Then he could identify the boy. We could take him to the rail works and get him to identify the man who attacked him and your employer.’

‘We could do that, I suppose …’ said Hazlewood cautiously.

‘And why *would* we do that?’ roared the sergeant from behind his desk. ‘I’ve already had Mr bloody Cavanagh of the Metropolitan Railway giving me the bollocking to end all bollockings on account of your behaviour, Abberline, and if you think I intend to risk another one – or worse still have him talk to John Fowler or Charles Pearson and the next minute have the superintendent breathing down my neck – you’ve got another think coming.’

Abberline winked. ‘Our friend here can make it worth your while, sergeant.’

The sergeant narrowed his eyes. ‘Is this true?’ he demanded of Hazlewood.

The detective admitted it was true. He could indeed make it worth the sergeant’s while, and the sergeant did a little weighing-up. True, there was the risk of another bollocking, but then again he had a scapegoat in Abberline.

What’s more, a little extra wedge would come in handy, what with Mrs Sergeant’s birthday coming up.

So he’d agreed. He’d agreed that if they could produce this bodyguard then they had enough of a reason to confront the Indian lad at the dig, and now the Indian was coming over the mud towards them.

Bloody hell, thought Abberline, *he’s gone up in the world*. Wearing a new pair of strides, he was, as well as braces and a collarless shirt open at the neck. Still barefoot, mind, trousers flapping about his calves as he came closer towards them. Everybody, it seemed, was fixed by his dark, impenetrable gaze.

‘Bharat Singh?’ said Abberline. ‘I’m pleased to see all those cuts and bruises have healed since the last time I saw you.’

Barely acknowledging them, The Ghost stood before the group, holding files to his chest and looking quizzically from man to man. Abberline watched as the lad’s gaze swept past the bodyguard, and he reminded himself that if even half of what they said about this young man was true, then he might be a very slippery, not to mention dangerous, customer indeed. He readied himself. For what, he wasn’t sure. But he did it anyway.

‘Now,’ he said, addressing The Ghost, ‘if you don’t mind, we have a matter to attend to.’ Surreptitiously, he felt for the handle of his truncheon, and then directed his next question to the bodyguard. ‘Is this the man who set upon you and your two employers in the churchyard? Have a good long look now. It’s been a while, and he’s spruced up a bit in the meantime. But if you ask me, that’s not the kind of face you forget in a hurry, is it? So, come on, is it him, or not?’

The Ghost turned his attention to the bodyguard, meeting his eye. The man was tall, like the three punishers, but not cocky and arrogant like they were. A reduced man; the encounter in the graveyard had left him changed but here was his opportunity to recover some of that lost pride and dignity.

Abberline's fingers flexed on the butt of his truncheon; Aubrey was ready too, and the punishers stood with their eyes narrowed, hands loose by their sides, ready to reach for whatever concealed weapons they carried as they awaited their next set of orders and anticipated bloodshed.

And every single man there expected the bodyguard to give the answer 'yes'.

So it came as something of a surprise when he shook his head and said, 'No, this ain't the man.'

38

‘So, what is the truth of it then?’ asked Abberline.

‘I don’t think I know what you mean.’

The impromptu meeting at the rail works had broken up and Abberline had left with his tail between his legs, and then, back at the station, the sergeant had given him a flea in his ear, and then, with his tail between his legs and his flea in his ear, Abberline had gone searching for the bodyguard.

Why? Because he’d seen the look on the geezer’s face and he’d seen the look on Bharat Singh’s face into the bargain and there was something there. *Non-recognition my arse, those two know each other*. They had a … well, strange as it may sound, but Abberline would have said he’d witnessed a kind of grudging, mutual respect pass between them.

So the next order of business was to find the bodyguard, which wasn’t difficult. He’d done it with Hazlewood the previous day, and this afternoon he found the bodyguard in the same place: the Ten Bells on Commercial Street in Whitechapel, a favourite haunt of prostitutes and blaggers, the occasional police constable and disgraced former bodyguards attempting to drown their sorrows.

‘You’re protecting him is what I think,’ said Abberline.

Without a word the bodyguard picked up his drink and moved to a table in the snug. Abberline followed and sat opposite. ‘Someone paying you to protect him – is that it? Not a man in robes by any chance?’

No answer.

‘Or perhaps you’re protecting him out of the goodness of your own heart?’ said Abberline. Now the man looked up at him with sorrowful eyes and Abberline knew he was on the right track. He pressed the point home. ‘What if I were to tell you that I had my own suspicions about this young Indian man? What if I were to tell you that I think he might well have saved my life the other day, and that, in fact, far from trying to put this fella in the clink I’m actually beginning to wonder if he might be on the side of the angels.’

Another pause and then the bodyguard began to speak in a voice that rumbled from between his hunched shoulders. ‘Well, then you would be right, constable,

because if you ask me, he is indeed on the side of the angels. He's a good man. A better man than either you or I will ever be.'

'Speak for yourself. So he was in the churchyard that night then?'

'He was indeed and there wasn't no "setting upon" anyone being done. There was a wrong – a wrong with which I was involved, to my shame – a wrong that he put right. My employers at the time, two nobs, were doing down a dollymop, just for kicks, because they could. And me and my mates were looking out for them. Ours not to reason why and all that.'

Abberline gave a thin smile of recognition.

'And this young man turns up, the only passer-by who did anything more than react to her screams with mild puzzlement. And when the two nobs wouldn't stop their game he stopped it for them.

'I've never seen anything move so fast, I'm telling you: boy, man or animal. He bested all of us, including yours truly. He did it in the blink of an eye, and we deserved it; every last one of us, we had it coming.

'So if you're asking why I didn't identify him at the rail works, and if you're sincere when you say he's a decent man, and as long as you're asking me in the snug of the Ten Bells, knowing I'll deny it at the site, at the station or if I'm up before the beak, then yes, it was the same man. And bloody good luck to him.'

'Of course it was the same man.'

Marchant and Cavanagh had met Hazlewood at the Travellers Club on Pall Mall, where they took him to the smoking room overlooking Carlton Gardens.

Cavanagh was a member at the Traveller's, nominated by Colonel Walter Lavelle, shortly before Cavanagh had killed him; Marchant, as Cavanagh's right-hand man, was also familiar with the club. Hazlewood, on the other hand, was agog or, as he'd later say to his wife, 'as excited as a dog with two cocks'. Men like him weren't accustomed to being entertained in the Travellers Club on Pall Mall, and he smelled money, as well as maybe the chance to solve this bloody case into the bargain. And maybe, if he played his cards right, the chance to solve the case *and* make a bit of extra chink on the side.

Not forgetting, of course, the fact that it was a swanky old place, and no mistake.

Around them was the laughter and raised voices of drunken lords and gentlemen getting even drunker, but it was hard to imagine Cavanagh participating. He sat in a voluminous leather armchair with his hands on the armrests, wearing a smart black suit with flashes of white shirt at the collar and cuffs. But even though he fitted in among the toffs and swells, Cavanagh radiated a certain danger, and it was telling that when the occasional passing

gentleman greeted him with a wave, their smiles dipped momentarily, more as though they were paying their respects than saying hello.

'You think the man who attacked your client and my employee Bharat Singh are one and the same?' he asked Hazlewood now.

'I'm sure of it, sir.'

'What makes you so sure?'

'Because when I hear hooves I look for horses, not zebras.'

Marchant looked confused but Cavanagh nodded. 'In other words you think logic dictates it must be the same man.'

'That I do – that and the fact that I spoke to our friend the bodyguard afterwards and it was pretty obvious that for reasons best known to his own self, he was keeping quiet about it.'

'Then perhaps we need to persuade the bodyguard,' said Cavanagh, and Hazlewood thought 'money', and wondered if some of it might be coming his way.

'Tell me,' said Cavanagh, 'if this young Indian man set upon the bodyguard, and – what? Four other men? – in an unprovoked and vicious attack, then why would the bodyguard want to protect him?'

Hazlewood looked shifty. At a nod from Cavanagh, Marchant took folding money from his pocket and laid it on the table between them.

Here we go, thought Hazelwood, palming it. 'Well,' he said, 'I only know what I've been told, but it seems the Indian lad took it upon himself to rescue a damsel in distress who was being used as a bit of a plaything by the two toffs.'

Cavanagh nodded, eyes flitting around the wood-panelled room. He knew the type. 'Getting their jollies, were they?'

'By the sounds of things. Your man, this Indian boy, was quite the dervish, it seems. He took on the lot of them and won, and by all accounts carried the poor tail they was doing down off into the night.'

'I see,' said Cavanagh. He paused for nearby laughter to die down. 'Well, Mr Hazlewood, I thank you for your honesty, and for bringing this matter to our attention. If you leave it with us, we should like to conduct our own investigations. Perhaps, when this process is complete, and assuming that our findings are in accordance with your own suspicions, we can join forces, so that we can root out the bad apple, and you can get your man.'

When Hazlewood had left, a happy man, Cavanagh turned to his companion. 'We shall be true to our word, Marchant. We shall look very closely into our interesting Indian colleague.'

39

Early the next morning, as was quickly becoming his custom, Abberline was staring at a dead body. Beside him stood Aubrey, and the two constables took off their helmets as a mark of respect. They knew the man who lay sprawled on the street, his face barely recognizable beneath eyes that had swelled shut, a face that was a mixture of purple bruises and open cuts, and a broken jaw that hung at an obscene angle.

It was the bodyguard.

‘Someone wanted to shut him up, obviously,’ said Aubrey.

‘No,’ replied Abberline thoughtfully, staring at the corpse and wondering how many more had to die. ‘I don’t think they were trying to shut him up. I think they were trying to make him talk.’

Across the city, Cavanagh sat behind his desk at the rail works office, Marchant on one side, Hardy on the other.

In front of the desk, sitting on forbidding straight-backed chairs and wearing expressions to match, were the Templar Grand Master Crawford Starrick and Lucy Thorne. As usual, they wanted a report from Cavanagh, the man who had promised to deliver them the artefact but who had so far conspicuously failed to do so, and as usual they wanted that report to include encouraging news.

‘We’re close,’ Cavanagh told them.

Lucy sighed and frowned and rearranged her skirts. Starrick looked distinctly unimpressed. ‘This is what you said last time, and the time before that.’

‘We’re closer,’ added Cavanagh, unperturbed by his Grand Master’s irritation. ‘We have to be. We’re in the immediate vicinity of the artefact’s location.’

There came a knock at the door and Other Hardy showed his face. ‘Sir, sorry to disturb you, but Mr and Mrs Pearson have arrived.’

Starrick rolled his eyes but Cavanagh held out a hand to show it was a matter of no concern. ‘Ill as he is, Pearson prefers the company of the navvies to the hospitality of the office. He’ll have his usual royal tour, don’t worry.’

Other Hardy glanced back out of the door. ‘Seems all right, sir. Like you say, he’s making his way over to the trench.’

‘Even so,’ said Starrick, ‘I believe that concludes our business. Miss Thorne and I shall take our leave. See to it that the next time we visit you have some more encouraging news for me.’

When they had gone Cavanagh looked at Marchant with hooded eyes. ‘He’s a fool; he knows his time is short.’

‘He is the Templar Grand Master, sir,’ said Marchant, and then added with an obsequious smile, ‘for the time being.’

‘Exactly,’ said Cavanagh. ‘For the moment. Until such time as I have the artefact.’

And he allowed himself a smile. The ghost of a smile.

Meanwhile, as Cavanagh, Marchant and co. were occupied with Starrick and Thorne – and with The Ghost yet to begin his shift – Pearson was doing just as Cavanagh said he would, and conducting a small tour of the works, his wife Mary on his arm.

The men loved Pearson, and on this particular occasion had cooked up a plan to show him just how much. At the office steps, with Starrick and Thorne making their way to the gates, Marchant watched the men gather around Mr and Mrs Pearson, and frowned, seeing that work seemed to have been abandoned for no good reason he could think of. There was definitely something happening, though. He leaned on the rail to speak to Other Hardy. ‘Get over there, would you? See what’s going on …’

40

It was a rare afternoon off for Police Constable Aubrey Shaw.

No, that wasn't strictly speaking true. Firstly, because Aubrey's afternoons off were comparatively frequent, and, secondly, because it wasn't really an 'afternoon off'. Not in the officially sanctioned sense anyway. A more accurate way of putting it would be to say that Police Constable Aubrey Shaw had donned plain clothes and was skiving again.

As usual, Aubrey's skiving incorporated a cricketing element. Most of the time this meant hoisting ale in the Green Man but today was a special day. He had taken his business to Lord's Cricket Ground in order to watch the annual Eton versus Harrow match. It was a nice sunny day to spend with a spot in the stands (albeit crowded, as the event was attended by tens of thousands), a pie and maybe an ale or three, with plenty of crinolines and bonnets to catch a man's eye and the cricket whites blinding in the sun.

Truth be known, Aubrey didn't much care for cricket, but the gentleman's sport was a pastime his wife approved of, and what's more it involved pies and beer – and meeting those two requirements was central to Aubrey's journey through life.

He thought of Abberline. Unmarried Abberline, constantly preoccupied Abberline – the two undeniably connected as far as Aubrey could see.

'A wife is what you need,' was what he'd told Abberline one afternoon in, where else but, the Green Man.

'A fellow bobby who cares more about police work and less about how to get out of doing it is what I need,' was what Abberline had replied.

Which was rather hurtful; after all, he, Aubrey, had become almost as involved in their ongoing case as Freddie, and …

Oh no, he thought, as he took his place on the stands, I'm not thinking about Freddie today. Freddie, begone. And to signal an end to work-related thoughts he began lustily joining in with the cheers, happy to submit himself to the tides of the game and the rhythm of the day. Just another face in the crowd. Worries ebbing away.

Still, though. He couldn’t help it. His thoughts returned to Abberline and his obsession with what he called ‘the goings-on at the rail works’. The two bobbies had asked themselves who beat the bodyguard to death. ‘One of them strongarms from the rail works,’ said Freddie predictably, but on this occasion Aubrey had to agree with him. It was as plain as the nose on your face that Cavanagh and co. were up to no good. After all, weren’t they all? Aristocrats and industrialists and politicians all feathered their own nests, and breaking a few laws was a small inconvenience if you had enough influence to ride roughshod over them.

Bloody hell, thought Aubrey. *Hark at me*. He was starting to think like Freddie himself. It was catching, that was what it was.

But they might know – this was what Abberline said. If they’d got it out of the bodyguard then Cavanagh and co. might be aware that Bharat Singh was the boy at the graveyard.

‘What would it matter to them if he was?’ Aubrey had asked.

‘Maybe nothing, Aubrey, maybe nothing. Who knows?’

It was a puzzle, no doubt about it. Like those carved wooden shapes that fitted together. You turned it over in your hands to try to work out how it fitted together.

A combination of cogitation, ale intake, the sheer volume of other spectators and the fact that he was here at Lord’s on an unofficial day off and probably wouldn’t have noticed anyway, meant that Aubrey wasn’t aware of three men who had barged through the crowds to take places at the rear of the stand. They stood with their backs to the fence, with their arms folded and the brims of their bowler hats pulled down in the universal pose of men trying to look unobtrusive.

The three men weren’t watching the game from beneath the brims of their hats. Their gaze was fixed firmly on Aubrey Shaw.

41

The last occupant of The Darkness had been Jayadeep Mir some three years ago. Nevertheless, the rooms had to be maintained and so, as regular as clockwork, Ajay and Kulpreet would take the steps down from the meeting house to sweep out the chambers and allow fresh air from outside to temporarily banish the dank air of gloom that otherwise hung about the place.

And as regular as clockwork Ajay would think it a great joke to lock Kulpreet in one of the rooms.

Clang.

He'd crept up on her and, before she could stop him, done it again; only this time, instead of standing outside snickering and mocking her as usual, he was making off down the passageway.

Her shoulders sank with the sheer boring inevitability of it all. Would he ever grow tired of it? Possibly not, because Ajay was nothing if not juvenile, and despite the fact that she had a husband and a little boy at home he was probably slightly in love with her too. And in her experience that was a very tedious combination in a man.

Exasperated, she called through the viewing aperture, 'Ajay, not again,' cursing that he'd been able to sneak up on her like that, the rat.

There was silence from outside. Ajay had gone. Damn his eyes. She hoped it wasn't one of those days when he decided to string out the joke. He'd left her in there for half an hour once. Thank heavens she'd long since learnt to bring a candle into the chambers with her.

'Ajay,' she called again, the words falling flat on the dank stone. She rattled the door, the sound bouncing away into the darkness. 'Ajay, this stopped being funny months ago. Open up, will you?'

Still there came no sound from outside and, come to think of it, she hadn't heard him for a while. Ajay wasn't one for keeping quiet. Even with him upstairs and her downstairs, he would have been calling to her, making bad jokes and puns, teasing her. In fact, when *was* the last time she'd heard any voice other than her own? You could lose all sense of time down here.

From outside the door came a sound that made her jump. ‘Ajay,’ she said sharply, but brought her leading arm to bear, tensing her wrist in readiness.

And then he was there, face at the window, grinning at her.

‘I got you that time, Kulpreet. You thought they’d come to get us, didn’t you?’

Right, she thought, and she arched one eyebrow and engaged her blade, precision-controlling its length so that it shot through the aperture and into the tip of Ajay’s nostril.

Not just one of the Indian Brotherhood’s best with a sword, Kulpreet was also one of the best with a blade, and it was a perfectly judged, expertly balanced deployment.

‘Impressive,’ said Ajay, with a newly acquired nasal twang. He was pinned in place by the blade, knowing that the slightest movement could effectively slice open his nostril, and thinking that, by God, she kept that thing sharp. Constantly greasing and recalibrating it, she was. ‘It’ll never jam, Ajay,’ she’d tell him, sliding the blade into its housing, and then follow it with her best disapproving stare. ‘Not like some others I could mention.’

Kulpreet kept her blade where it was. ‘Toss me the keys,’ she said, and then when he’d done as he was told and was free again, barged angrily past him on her way to the door.

Upstairs they locked up and prepared to leave for the night. Kulpreet studiously ignored Ajay, which she knew was a far worse punishment for him than a hidden blade up his nose.

As she did every night she placed her flat-bladed sword into the wall rack, kissed her fingers and touched them to the fine Indian steel, before joining Ajay at the meeting-house door. The two Assassins said their parting words then slipped outside and locked the door behind them.

Neither noticed faces in the crowded street that watched them leave with interest – and then moved to follow.

42

What a great day, thought Aubrey as he joined the thousands of spectators leaving Lord's. He was a little merry, if he was honest with himself. Merry enough to decide to sweet-talk a flower girl on a deal for a bunch, take the flowers home to Marjorie and tell his wife he loved her; merry enough to have forgotten all about acrobatic Indian boys and mysterious disappearing men in robes; and way too merry to notice the three men who were following him, their heads bowed and their hands in their pockets in the classic manner of men trying to look inconspicuous.

He was even merry enough to consider hailing one of the growlers constantly popping to and fro, but then decided against it. Best to sober up a bit. Just a bit. And so he kept on walking, turning off the main drag into quieter side streets, leaving the crowds and clopping hooves behind as he weaved his way through darker streets where the constant sound of running water reminded him that he needed a piss, and he ducked into an alleyway to relieve himself.

Because in the end it's the small things that matter as much as the big ones: a stolen pocket watch that is slow, a man in need of a piss.

Aubrey sensed the light in the alleyway change before he saw anything, and still putting himself back into his trousers, he glanced to one end and saw that in the mouth of the alleyway stood a figure. Then back at the other end: another figure.

Aubrey shivered. Any other day and this would be a pair of mutchers, the street ruffians who preyed on the poor souls who were too drunk to offer much resistance – and of course Aubrey could deal with them all right, drunk or sober.

But this wasn't any other day. And besides, he fancied he recognized the two men who blocked both exits, and that made it worse than a pair of mutchers.

They were moving up the alley towards him. A third figure had appeared at the mouth of the alley. Aubrey desperately wished he had his truncheon but knew it would be no good. He cast his eyes at the streaming wall in front of him in the hope that a ladder might magically be present, and then back at the men, who were upon him now.

He recognized the grinning faces in the second before the light went out. Just as he'd known he would.

Striding through the streets of Amritsar in their robes, Kulpreet and Ajay had been preoccupied with their own thoughts – which was why they didn't notice until it was too late that the crowd had seemed to de-materialize, and in the street before them was a line of seven men in matching brown suits.

Curses.

They wheeled round. The street was emptying. Behind them was another phalanx of men in brown suits, nervous crowds moving away from them like ripples from a dropped stone. A tempo of fear increased as the brown suits began to produce kukris from within their coats. Over a dozen blades versus two.

Ajay and Kulpreet looked at one another. With a reassuring smile she pulled her cowl over her head and he did the same, and then he reached to give her three quick taps and a squeeze on her upper arm, and she responded to the code with a nod. They knew what to do.

Mentally they both counted – *one, two, three* – and then, in one coordinated movement, went back to back, deploying their blades at the same time. It was a measure of how quiet everything had become that the noise of this was audible, and a measure of how confident the brown suits felt that they didn't even flinch, didn't even look nervous.

The one in the middle was the leader. He gave a whistle and rotated a finger. As one, the brown suits began to advance, the end of each line edging forward, closing the circle in the hope of trapping Ajay and Kulpreet at its centre.

'*Now*,' said Kulpreet and they made their move. She dashed to a canopy on her left and he went in the opposite direction, and both reached their respective targets before the brown suits could get to them.

Ajay's blade was back in its housing as he hit the wall running, his bare feet clinging to the stone as he reached for a sill and heaved himself up. Two more grunting efforts and he was on the roof traversing the building, jumping down to the street on the other side and sprinting into a passageway. At the end was one of Amritsar's street walls separating one thoroughfare from the next, and Ajay went for it now, knowing he'd be home free if he could scale the wall and get over.

He never made it. The brown suits had anticipated his move, and as Ajay reached the end of the alleyway they appeared, taking him by surprise. He stumbled and saw a kukri flashing towards him, and acting on instinct brought his hidden-blade arm into defence, engaging the steel …

Only, the blade didn't engage.

It jammed.

43

Aubrey had no idea where he was, but sensed that was the least of his concerns.

What mattered was that he was bound to a chair in a room that was dark, apart from a flickering orange glow given off by lamps bolted to the walls, while in front of him stood the three punishers, gazing at him with smiling dispassion, preparing to do their work.

Hardy moved forward. He pulled on black leather gloves and then from his jacket pocket took a pair of brass knuckles that he slipped over his fingers. The two other men shared a look and then stepped back into the shadows as Hardy came to Aubrey and put his gloved hand to the peeler's face, like a sculptor testing the consistency of his unmoulded clay.

And then he moved back and placed his feet with the expertise of a boxer, and Aubrey thought that closing his eyes might be a good idea right now, so he did, and it was funny, because he'd always found it difficult to picture his family when he was away from them; it was something he always wished he could do – just to have them with him. But they came to him now. A perfect image of them that he clung to as the blows began raining in. There was that, at least, to be said for being beaten up.

Thank God for small mercies.

Kulpreet awoke with a sore head and found herself squinting in the grey dark of a warehouse: an empty, cavernous space, with just the slapping sound of rain pouring through the roof and birds nesting in the rafters. Rusting stairways led to ancient dilapidated gantries overhead.

She was restrained in an unusual manner. She was seated at one end of a long slatted table, to all intents and purposes as though she were an honoured guest for dinner – apart from the fact that you tended not to tie up honoured guests. Her chair was pushed neatly beneath the table. She couldn't see her feet but they were bound to the chair legs. Meanwhile, her hands were laid out in front of her and tied tightly with leather thongs, palms flat to the tabletop. They were placed almost as though she were about to receive a manicure.

In a sense she was. A few inches from her fingers, laid very deliberately so that she could see them, was a pair of pliers, the sort of rusting pliers one might use to extract a fingernail.

She knew of this torture of course. The cumulative pain. Apparently there was an Assassin who had managed five before he broke.

As far as she could tell, there were three brown suits in the warehouse with her. With a clenched jaw she watched as one of them inspected her hidden blade, and if there was one thing that made her angry – beyond being captured, beyond having it taken from her and beyond being told by sniggering brown suits that Ajay had been cut down like a dog in the street, it was that. They had Ajay's blade as well. Another Templar thug stood at the end of the table turning it over in his hands.

'This one jammed,' he told his friends, and they laughed.

But that's not why you can't deploy it, you idiot, thought Kulpreet. Not unless you can slip it over your wrist and arrange your muscles and tendons in such a way as to precisely emulate Ajay or can activate the fail-safe switch, and to be honest you could spend the rest of your life looking for the fail-safe switch and still not find it.

The lead brown suit turned his attention from his colleagues to Kulpreet. 'It's calibrated to each individual Assassin,' called the lead brown shirt over his shoulder as he came forward to Kulpreet. Behind him the two thugs had grown bored of inspecting the blades and dropped them to the table, and she wanted to look over at them, to check their position, but didn't dare.

She was thinking about that fail-safe switch.

'Well, well, she's awake, said the grinning inquisitor. 'Looks like it's time to begin.'

He picked up the pliers but then made a show of pretending to reconsider and dropped them back to the table with a clunk. 'Maybe I won't be needing those,' he said, almost to himself. 'I mean, it's not as if it's a difficult question, the one I have to ask. "Did you put Jayadeep Mir to death three years ago, or was he banished to London instead?" It's quite straightforward really.'

He looked at her, but if he was hoping for a response she didn't give him the satisfaction. He continued. 'You see, pretty one, we have a colleague in London who was a British army officer who spent some time in India, and he heard all about the extraordinary Jayadeep Mir, and now he's met a rather extraordinary Indian boy in London and what with one thing and another he wonders if the two might be one and the same. What do you have to say about that?'

She said nothing but when he stepped to one side and retrieved the pliers she was able to see past him and check the position of the blades. Now she needed to

check the stability of the table, and she feigned a helpless fury, shaking herself as though trying to wrench free. The men shared an amused glance but she'd learnt what she needed to know: the table was not secured to the floor, but it was heavy, too heavy for her to tip by herself. She'd need help to do that.

But if she could tip it, then maybe she could reach one of the blades.

'Water,' she said softly.

'I beg your pardon,' said the inquisitor. He'd been turning the pliers over in his hand, staring at them fondly. 'What was that?'

She made as though she were too parched to form words. 'Water …'

He leaned a little closer. 'What did you say?'

Was he close enough to grab with her teeth? She had two chances to do this, and this was one of them. But if she messed it up …

No. Best to wait. Best to try to lull him into a false sense of security.

And so, as though making a Herculean effort, she managed to say the word 'water' audibly enough for her inquisitor to hear, and he stepped away, beaming.

'Ah, I thought that's what you said.' He indicated to one of the men who disappeared then reappeared a few moments later with an earthenware mug that he placed on the table in front of her.

She made an attempt to reach for it with her teeth before fixing him with a look of appeal, and with a smile he picked up the mug and lifted it to her lips, excited at having this beautiful woman so much in his control that she needed help even having a sip of water. Oh, how he was going to enjoy what came next. The inquisitor was a man who enjoyed his work. He was good at it; he was an expert when it came to inflicting …

Pain.

It shot up his arm. With her teeth she had clamped on to his hand and she wasn't just biting him, she was eating him. Oh my God, she was eating him alive.

He yelled in agony. The mug dropped but didn't smash. Kulpreet kept her teeth clenched on the inquisitor's hand, tasting sweat and dirt and wrenching her neck at the same time, maximizing his pain and using every ounce of her strength to bring him closer. At the same time she tipped the legs of the chair out to one side, resting all her weight on her forearms as she used them to slam into the inquisitor's shins, sending him off balance and increasing the speed of his downward journey so that at last he sprawled to the table, face breaking the earthenware mug as he made contact, and if that added to his pain then great, thought Kulpreet, but that wasn't her main objective, because what she needed to do now was …

And with all her might and using the weight of them both, she bore down on the table, which tilted so the blades came skidding down the surface towards her waiting fingertips. The inquisitor was in the way so she couldn't even see them come but she felt one reach her fingertips just as he managed to yank his hand free of her mouth, and she gasped with her own pain as one of her teeth went with it. Blood and torn flesh were round her mouth but she didn't care about that now; all she cared about was the blade she was turning over in her hands, feeling for the fail-safe. Over the body of the inquisitor she could see the other two men exchanging an amused glance before reaching for their kukris, because, after all, what could she do? The odds were not in her favour. Even with a blade she was still tied to a chair, and there were three of them and a locked door. Skilled and clever and lucky as she was, there wasn't enough luck in the world to save her now. They knew it, she knew it. They all knew how this would end: she would tell them what they wanted to know and then she would die.

Kulpreet realized this of course. But the object of getting the blades was not to use on her captors.

It was to use on herself.

But still, thank God for small mercies, because she had the opportunity to take one with her and so as her thumb went to the fail-safe switch, she did what looked like an odd thing: she brought her face close to the throat of the inquisitor, who was still trying to pull free of her. She brought her face close to his throat as though she were trying to look at something closely there, and because of the position of her arms it looked as if she were taking him in a lover's embrace, pressing her flesh to his.

One of her captors realized her true intention but it was too late. She had already rammed the blade housing up to the inquisitor's neck and then, with her eye still at his throat, released the blade, which shot through him and into her.

Just before Kulpreet died she thought of all she had done. She thought of her husband and little boy at home, who would be wondering where she was. She even thought of poor old Ajay – *Well, I'll be joining you soon, old friend* – and she thought of the Brotherhood and wished it well, and it was with a heavy heart that she knew the struggle for a better and fairer world would have to continue without her.

And as the point of the blade drove through her attacker's neck and into her own eye and into her brain, Kulpreet knew this was a better death than the one they had planned for her, but she wondered if it was a noble death. She had told them nothing, and she hoped that would count for something. She hoped the Council would decree that she died with honour.

44

Two days later on the harbour at Amritsar, three men in brown suits intercepted an Assassin messenger.

The three men killed the Assassin, made sure to retrieve the message he'd been due to deliver to London, and then bundled his body into a wagon for pig feed.

As instructed the message was handed to Templar codebreakers, who set about decoding it, a process that took them a week or so.

'Urgent,' it said, when translated. 'Mission possibly compromised. Ajay and Kulpreet dead, maybe tortured for information. Suggest abort mission at once.'

And then, at the bottom: 'Ethan, look after my son.'

45

Abberline was in the Green Man. But not drinking today. Not brooding nor drowning his sorrows. He was there on altogether more pressing business.

‘Hey, Sam, you seen Aubrey today?’

‘Not seen him for a while, Freddie,’ replied the barman. ‘No, tell a lie, he popped his head round the door earlier, on his way to Schools’ Day at Lord’s.’

Freddie shot the barman a confused look and Sam was disgusted in return. ‘What the bloody hell are you doing in here if you don’t even know about the Eton–Harrow match?’

‘All right, keep your hair on … what’s left of it. Aubrey was on his way there, was he?’

Sam suddenly pulled a face, as though he’d said too much. ‘Well, um … no. He was on duty, wasn’t he?’

Now it was Abberline’s turn to be exasperated. ‘Look, you can’t tell me anything about Aubrey I don’t already know. He was on a skive, right?’

Sam slapped a bar towel over his shoulder and gave Abberline the kind of reluctant nod that wouldn’t stand up in a court of law.

‘Right,’ said Abberline. ‘Now we’re getting somewhere. He came in here to … Oh, I know. He came in here to change his clothes, did he?’

Another reluctant nod.

‘All right,’ said Abberline, sliding off his stool and about to make for the door. ‘When he comes back for his uniform, tell him I’m looking for him, would you?’

‘Bloody hell, everyone wants old Aubs at the moment, don’t they?’

Abberline stopped and turned. ‘Come again?’

‘Like I say, seems like everyone wants to talk to Aubrey.’ Again Sam was wearing a queasy look, as though he might have said too much.

‘Put a bit more meat on those bones for me, mate. Who exactly is looking for Aubrey, apart from me?’

‘Three geezers came in not long after he’d left for the match.’

‘And what did they look like?’ asked Abberline and then felt his heart sink as Sam gave him a description of the three punishers.

Not knowing what else to do, he headed for Lord's, but immediately regretted it when he found himself swimming against the tide of humanity leaving the ground. Cabs were stopping and turning tail. Nearby, a horse snorted and stamped its feet. The weight of people became too much for an Aunt Sally owner and he began packing quickly away. Same for the stallholder who called for the shoving, ebbing crowds to mind out, *mind the bloody barrow*, as little hands reached to grab produce from his stall. Another was pushing a cart away from the crowds, through a sea of bonnets and caps and children carried on shoulders. Abberline felt something drag his clothes and looked down to see a dog weaving through a forest of legs.

Despite the crowds the mood was genial. A good time was being had by all. The masses certainly enjoyed cheering on the sons of the nobility as they played their annual game, that was for sure, thought Abberline. One day the high-born progeny would be doing what all the upper classes did: lining their pockets at the expense of the lower orders, taking their fun where they found it and who cares if they ruin a few lives in the process.

And no, he didn't find Aubrey. He found lots of drunks passed out in the road. Found lots of women trying to sell him matches and posies. Found lots of swells and ladies in posh frocks looking down their noses at the drunks and match-sellers. But no Aubrey.

He went back to the Green Man.

Sam shook his head; there had been no further sign of Aubrey, and no, not the three men either.

The punishers, that's who it was, them at the line. He'd be paying those rail works a visit unless Aubrey turned up pretty soon. One more place to try, though, and he took himself to Aubrey's rooms in Stepney, where he lived with his wife and two children.

Mrs Shaw opened the door and relaxed when she saw his uniform. 'Don't tell me,' she said. 'You're Freddie Abberline?' When he nodded she burst out with, 'Well, haven't we heard a lot about you! Children, come and meet the famous Fresh-faced Freddie.'

She had ruddy cheeks but was otherwise opposite to Aubrey in every way, being slight where he was well built, and while he wore a permanently nervous and bewildered expression, she was an entirely different kettle of fish, beaming with welcome and fussing about her hair as she invited her guest inside.

Two children, a boy and a girl, both around five or six, came running, only to skid to a halt, cling to her skirts and gaze at him with the kind of naked curiosity that only children can get away with.

Abberline's heart, already heavy with worry for Aubrey, sank a little more at the scene. It would have been easier to keep a safe distance between him and the things Aubrey loved. Seeing them like this would only make things harder if what Abberline feared was true. Most of the time he envied men like Aubs, who went home to wives and families, but not at times like this. Not when you saw what you left behind.

'I can't stay, Mrs Shaw, I'm afraid,' he said, reluctantly having to dampen the warm welcome he was being given. 'I was just wondering if you knew of Aubrey's whereabouts at all?'

The smile slid off her face, replaced by a look of immediate worry. The two children, sensing their mother's sudden distress, clung on to her skirts more tightly, eyes widening into frightened saucers.

'No, not since he went out this morning,' she said.

'On his way to Lord's?'

She chewed her lip. 'I can't rightly say.'

'I know he was on his way to Lord's, Mrs Shaw, but the match is over, and I was wondering if he'd returned.'

'Maybe he went for an ale in the Green Man?'

'Of course,' he said. 'That's it. I'll take my leave for there, if I may, and wish you all the best, and if you'd let Aubrey know that I'm looking for him then I'd be much obliged.'

And Abberline did just that. He took his leave. He went back to the Green Man, just in case, and Sam shook his head and said no, and then Abberline went to the station, just in case, and the desk sergeant shook his head no, with a suspicious expression, as though he knew Aubrey had been on the skive. And then, lastly, Abberline went to the rail works, where he stood by the fence and looked over the site. The work continued: fires had been built as they were every night and braziers glowed on the mudflats. As Abberline waited there, a steam train pulled in from further up the line and the activities on the wooden cranes grew even more frenetic as navvies began to unload the spoil.

But Abberline wasn't looked at that. He was keeping his eye on the office. He watched as the door opened and out came the Indian lad, clutching his files.

Good, thought Abberline, finding it a reassuring sight. For some reason he doubted any harm would come to Aubrey if the Indian lad was around.

'He is indeed on the side of the angels. He's a good man. A better man than either you or I will ever be.'

What Abberline saw next was an even more reassuring sight. Coming out of the office were the punishers, all three of them, as casual as you like. And if they were here, well, then they weren't out there somewhere, hurting Aubrey.

Abberline wondered if maybe their paths had been similar to his own. Perhaps they had reached the Green Man and been sent to Lord's where they had been deterred by the crowds.

Yes, he thought, turning away from the fence and putting the site to his back. Yes that was it. Hopefully by now, Aubrey was safely back in the bosom of his smiling family …

His landlady lived on the ground floor and she appeared the minute he showed his face. 'Busy day, constable?' she said.

'You might say that, ma'am,' said Abberline, removing his helmet.

'Too busy to tell me you were expecting a delivery?'

He looked at her sharply. 'A delivery?'

'Three gentlemen delivering a large rug, so they said. Must have been a bloody heavy rug too, because it took all three of them to get it up there …'

Abberline was already mounting the stairs.

The bastards had left the body sitting up in one of Abberline's chairs, as though awaiting his return. They'd left it there as a warning.

They'd beaten him to death. He was barely recognizable beneath the puffed-up, livid flesh, bulging bruises, closed-up eyes, and the blood that oozed from cuts made by brass knuckles.

'Oh, Aubrey,' said Abberline.

It's not like they'd been friends, but … Wait a minute, yes, they *had* been friends, because friends supported one another. You could turn to them for advice. They helped you think about things a different way. And Aubrey had done all that and more for him.

Before he knew it, his shoulders were shaking and tears dropped to the boards of his room. 'Oh Aubrey,' he repeated through a wet mouth, wanting to reach out and embrace the man, his friend, but at the same time repulsed by what they had done to him, his features pummelled away like so much tenderized meat.

Instead he tried to imagine Aubrey as he was, telling him music-hall jokes in the Green Man. Mourning the death of a slum girl. He had too much compassion, that was Aubrey's problem. He had too much heart for this world.

And he wondered what it would have been like for Aubrey in his dying moments. They would have demanded information of course. They would already have known about the Indian from the bodyguard, so what might Aubrey have told them? About the man in the robes, perhaps. As if it mattered now. The other day Abberline had told himself the killing had to stop and yet the whole business had claimed yet another life, a precious one.

Maybe Aubrey was right. Maybe there were no answers. Maybe you just had to accept that once in a while.

For the time being, he simply stood with his friend, Aubrey Shaw, shoulders shaking, tears flowing more freely now.

‘I’m sorry, mate,’ he said over and over again. ‘I’m so bloody sorry.’

And then, Aubrey’s eyes opened.

46

Months passed. In May the Chancellor of the Exchequer Gladstone declared himself delighted after taking the first full journey on the new underground railway. He and various other Metropolitan dignitaries, including John Fowler, Charles Pearson and Cavanagh, had travelled the entire length of the line, all four miles of it, from the Bishop's Road station in Paddington, through tunnels and other half-built stations – Edgware Road, Baker Street, Portland Road, Gower Street, King's Cross – and lastly to Farringdon Street in the city. A journey of some eighteen minutes or so.

Gladstone's seal of approval was important to the Metropolitan, especially as the Prime Minister, Palmerston, had always been rather sniffy about the project, declaring that at his age he wanted to spend as much time as possible above ground, thank you very much. But Gladstone's approval gave a boost to a project that was otherwise greeted with at best mild suspicion and apathy by the general public and at worst outright hatred and hostility.

However, the railway's reputation was dented further when, the following month, the Fleet sewer burst. The brick pipes through which London's 'foul black river' flowed had been weakened and eventually broke, water and filth flooding the tunnel to a depth of ten feet, putting the project back by months while remedial work was carried out.

And then, early one morning in late July, the Clarence belonging to Mr Cavanagh of the Metropolitan Railway left the site, bearing its owner to St Katherine Docks.

There the carriage waited for a ship to discharge its cargo, which in this case was three Indian men in brown suits, two of whom were escorting a third man, who they delivered to the Clarence, taking their leave with a bow and returning to their ship.

The new arrival took a seat across from Cavanagh, who had loosened his jacket but otherwise made no concession to the July heat.

'Hello, Ajay,' said Cavanagh.

Ajay looked at him flatly. 'I was promised money. Lodgings. A new life here in London.'

‘And we were promised the full benefit of your knowledge with regard to Jayadeep Mir,’ said Cavanagh, and then pulled the cord and sat back as Hardy shook the reins and they made their return to the site. ‘Let’s see if we can both abide by the terms of the agreement, shall we?’

A short while later the carriage came to a halt outside the rail works and Ajay was directed to look out of the window. As arranged, Marchant brought the unsuspecting Bharat Singh to a designated spot some one hundred yards away on the other side of the fence, close enough for Ajay to see.

‘That’s our man,’ said Cavanagh.

‘And what does he call himself?’ asked Ajay.

‘He goes by the name Bharat Singh.’

‘Then that must have been something of a comedown for him,’ said Ajay, who pulled down the blind and settled back into his seat, ‘because that man is Jayadeep Mir.’

‘Excellent,’ said Cavanagh. ‘Now, how about you tell me everything you know about him?’

There was a trick the gangs used when they wanted information. ‘Two birds’ they called it. Gang members would take two unlucky souls to the roof, throw one of them off and make the other one watch.

Two birds. One of them flies, one of them sings.

Ajay had been outside the door when Kulpreet died her honourable death. He had seen what lay in store for him: either the world’s most painful manicure or death.

And then he made them his offer. They could torture him, and good luck to them if they tried, for he’d do everything to resist, and if their questioning was successful they’d get what they needed to know but nothing else besides, and they’d never be sure if it was the truth or not.

Or … if they met his demands, then he would tell them everything they needed to know and a *lot* more besides.

So the Templars had it put about that Ajay had died in the alley, and the Assassin – now an ex-Assassin, a traitor – was given passage to London.

And there outside the railway he upheld his side of the bargain and told Cavanagh everything. He told them that the man they knew as Bharat Singh was, in fact, Jayadeep Mir. He told them that Jayadeep had been imprisoned because of a failure of nerve, and Cavanagh had been most interested in that particular aspect of the story, before Ajay went on to tell him that Jayadeep had been delivered into the custody of Ethan Frye for a mission. More than that he did not know.

‘A mission?’ mused Cavanagh, staring with interest at The Ghost, seeing him anew. ‘An *undercover* mission, perhaps?’

Cavanagh’s mind went to the information relayed by the punishers. The two Hardys and Smith had returned from questioning Constable Aubrey Shaw with news that a man in robes was responsible for killing Robert Waugh, and now, with this latest piece of information, things had finally fallen into place.

How ironic. Their newest recruit, who had curried favour with them by killing a traitor, did so with treachery on his own mind – and was not even responsible for the kill.

All in all, thought Cavanagh, it was a delightful outcome. He had long since decided that when he killed Crawford Starrick and wrested the position of Grand Master from him, when he had the artefact and was the most powerful man not just in London but in the known world of the Knights Templar, that his first order of business would be to smash what remained of the Assassin resistance in his city.

Here, though, was a chance to do both simultaneously, an opportunity to ascend to the rank of Grand Master with a feather in his cap as well as the artefact to prove his suitability for the role. In one fell swoop he would secure command of the rite as well as the respect of its membership. Oh yes, this was most opportune.

‘And now for your side of the bargain,’ said Ajay.

‘Yes, my side of the bargain.’

The door to the carriage opened, and there stood Hardy. ‘I promised you riches and lodgings in London, and you shall have them, on one condition.’

Guarded and ready for the double-cross, with an escape route in mind, Ajay said, ‘Yes, and what is that?’

‘That you continue to tell us everything you can about the Brotherhood.’

Ajay relaxed. They would keep him alive that long, at least. Plenty of time to make his escape.

‘It’s a deal,’ he said.

47

Months passed, during which Aubrey stayed in Freddie Abberline's rooms and Freddie nursed him back to health. Aubrey had fewer teeth and spoke differently, as though his tongue was too big for his mouth, and there were other injuries besides, but he was alive. And there was a lot to be said for that. And he was a good companion, and Abberline soon found that there was a lot to be said for that too.

One night, a fortnight or so after the beating, Abberline had brought Aubrey some broth, leaving it on a bedside table, and thinking him asleep was about to depart when he looked at his friend's face and saw it wet with tears.

He cleared his throat and looked down at his stockinged feet. 'Um, are you all right there, me old mate? You getting a bit of the old bad-memory gubbins, are you? Thinking back to what happened?'

Aubrey winced with pain as he nodded yes, and then through broken teeth said, 'I told them everything, Freddie. It weren't a lot, but I sang like a bird.'

Abberline had shrugged. 'Good luck to 'em. Hope it means more to them than it does to either of us.'

'But I told them. I told them everything.' Aubrey was wracked by a sob, his bruised face crumpling with the shame of it.

'Hey, hey,' said Abberline, perching on the edge of the mattress. He reached for Aubrey's hand. 'It doesn't matter, mate. Anyway, you had no choice. And look, something tells me that our friend in robes can look after himself.'

He sat like that for a while, in silence, grateful for the comfort they each provided. And then Abberline had helped Aubrey with his broth before taking his leave, telling his friend that he needed his rest.

Meanwhile, Aubrey was listed as missing. 'Missing, presumed bored of police work and retiring to the Green Man for good' was the rumour, but Abberline knew different. He knew that the point of the attack was to send a message, and to all intents and purposes, he heeded the warning. No more site visits for him. By complete coincidence the division sergeant had assigned him a different beat, one that took him nowhere near the rail works. 'Just in case you get tempted,' was what he'd said as he delivered the news.

You're in it up to your eyeballs, aren't you? was what Abberline had thought, staring with concealed fury across the table at his division sergeant. But he walked his beat, and when his shift was done he went home to peel off his uniform, check Aubrey was all right and then ignored the other man's warnings and returned to the rail works. Every night, hidden in the shadows. A lone vigil of what, he didn't know, but a vigil nevertheless.

Aubrey was up and about by now, albeit with limited locomotion, and later the two men would sit before the fire, having a chinwag. Abberline would talk about the case. He was consumed by it. Aubrey talked of little else but his family and, more to the point, when he would see them again.

'No, Aubs, I'm sorry,' Abberline told him, 'but those geezers left you for dead and if you turn up alive they'll want to finish the job. You're staying here until this thing is over.'

'But when will it be over, Freddie?' said Aubrey. He shifted painfully in his chair. Though his face showed no signs of his ordeal apart from the criss-crossing of scars left on his cheek by the brass knuckledusters, his insides had taken a pummelling, and there was a pain in his hip that seemed in no danger of going. It made it difficult to walk; it even made it difficult to sit still at times, and every time he winced with the pain of it, his mind went back to an anonymous darkened room and the relentless thump of fists ramming into a soft body that belonged to him.

Aubrey would never walk the beat again, but thanks to a combination of the punishers' carelessness and Abberline's care he was alive, and he never forgot to be grateful for that. On the other hand, what was life if it was a life spent without his loved ones?

'Just how do you think this whole thing – whatever this "thing" is – is going to end?' he said.

Abberline reached towards the fire and gave his friend a mournful smile. 'I don't know, Aubs, is the truth. I don't rightly know. But you mark my words, while I can't lay claim to be on top of the situation, I'm there or thereabouts. I'll know when it's time, and I promise you we won't lose a second getting you back to your family.'

They had decided for safety's sake that his wife and children couldn't know he was alive, but it meant all four of them lived in purgatory. One day Abberline and Aubrey took a police growler out to Stepney and sat in the street so Aubrey might catch glimpses of his family through the windows. After two hours or so it had been too much for him and they had left.

Abberline went to them with money and gifts. He took them Aubrey's uniform. There was no light in Mrs Shaw's eyes now. The visits were traumatic

for her, she said. Every time she saw Abberline standing on the doorstep she thought the worst. ‘Because I know if he was alive he’d be with you. And when I see you alone, I think he’s not.’

‘He may still be alive.’ Abberline told her, ‘There’s always hope.’

It was as though she hadn’t heard him. ‘You know the worst thing? It’s not having a body to bury.’

‘I know, Mrs Shaw, and I’m so, so sorry,’ said Abberline, and then left, happy to escape the weight of grief for a man who was not only alive but enjoying the relative comfort and warmth of Abberline’s rooms. Taking with him the guilt of having to lie.

It was for the greater good. It was for the safety of them all that Cavanagh and co. thought this particular loose end had been tied. But still. The guilt.

48

‘You are to be inducted into the Knights Templar,’ said Cavanagh. He, Marchant and two of the punishers – Hardy was missing – had taken The Ghost away from his duties and to a corner of the excavation site, to all intents and purposes conducting an impromptu works meeting.

‘Thank you, sir,’ said The Ghost. He bowed his head low, hating himself at that moment. When his eyes returned to Cavanagh he saw something unreadable in the man’s eyes, like a distant mocking.

‘But first, I have a job for you.’

‘Yes, sir,’ replied The Ghost. He maintained a blank expression but inside his mind raced and he felt his pulse quicken, thinking, *this is it*.

Indicating to his men to remain where they were, Cavanagh took The Ghost’s arm and began to lead him away from the group, towards the perimeter fence. There The Ghost could see Cavanagh’s Clarence. Tending to the horse was Hardy, who looked up at them briefly and then returned to brushing the nag’s mane.

Away from the noise, Cavanagh no longer needed to raise his voice. ‘What I’m about to tell you is information known only to members of the Knights Templar. You are yet to be inducted and so, by rights, I shouldn’t be revealing this, but you’ve proved yourself an asset to my operation and your task is what we might call “time sensitive”. In other words it needs to happen before the Council can meet to ratify your induction. I am a man of instinct and I prefer to act on it. I have faith in you, Bharat. I see much of myself in you.’

The Ghost allowed himself a feeling of triumph. Everything he had done, the months of living in the tunnel, of building a life as Bharat Singh, had all been leading to this moment.

Cavanagh continued. ‘This dig you’ve been involved in, perhaps you might have guessed, given my involvement, but there’s more to it than meets the eye. The railway will of course be finished, and it will of course be a success, but there is, believe it or not, an ulterior motive behind its construction.’

The Ghost nodded.

‘The Knights Templar in London are in search of an artefact believed to be buried along the line. Pinpointing its exact location has proved to be a demanding task. Let’s just say that, in my opinion at least, Lucy Thorne’s exalted position within the Order is not fully deserved. Certainly not on this showing.’

‘Lucy Thorne, sir?’

Cavanagh shot him a quick look and The Ghost had to suppress a nervous swallow. Was the director trying to catch him off-guard?

‘All in good time,’ said Cavanagh. ‘You have the delights of the ruling council to come. For the time being all you need to know is that Lucy Thorne is among a cadre of high-ranking Templars whose job it is to locate the artefact.’

‘This … artefact, sir, what does it do?’

‘Well, you see, this is the trouble with scrolls, isn’t it? They’re so damnably ambiguous. The details are left to the imagination, I’m afraid; the scrolls simply say that great power will come to whoever has it in their possession. And it may not surprise you to know that I intend to be the one in possession of it. Who I have at my side when that day comes will very much depend.’

‘I hope it will be me, sir,’ said The Ghost.

He glanced over to where the Clarence was tethered. Hardy was replacing the horse brush in the carriage stowage box, but as The Ghost watched he took something else from the box and slipped it into his pocket.

‘Well, as I say, that will very much depend,’ said Cavanagh.

The two men walked a few more paces, The Ghost keeping an eye on Hardy. The punisher seemed to have finished grooming the horse. Now he checked the harness buckles. And now he was leaving the carriage enclosure and making his way towards the gate, shouldering a match girl out of his way and kicking awake a navvy who leaned on the gatepost with a railwayman’s cap pulled over his eyes.

‘On what will it depend, sir?’

‘On how well you perform your task.’

Hardy was crossing the mudflats some fifty yards away.

‘And what task is that, sir?’

‘You are to kill Charles Pearson.’

Lately they had judged it too risky to meet; The Ghost, in particular, wanted to leave nothing to chance. But this was different. This represented a major escalation of events and he needed Ethan’s counsel, and so, after an exchange of gravestone positions in the Marylebone churchyard, the two Assassins convened at Leinster Gardens.

‘Why?’ asked Ethan. ‘Why kill Pearson?’

‘The rite commands it, so Mr Cavanagh says.’

‘Too much of a philanthropist for their taste, eh? Christ, they won’t even let him see his beloved railway open.’

‘Cavanagh has the details worked out, master. Now that work has resumed after the Fleet sewer burst, he wants to demonstrate to Mr Pearson that the line between King’s Cross and Farringdon Street is fully operational. What’s more, he has a new enclosed carriage to show off, and he plans a train ride to Farringdon Street and back. But at the end of the journey, when Mr and Mrs Pearson make their way back to their carriage, I am to kill him.’

‘But not Mrs Pearson?’

‘No.’

There was a long silence, and then The Ghost spoke. ‘What do you think?’

Ethan took a deep breath. ‘Well, it’s not a trap, not in the sense that they want to do you down; they could call you into the office for that. What it is, is a test.’

The Ghost’s palms were sweaty. He gulped and returned to a balmy room in Amritsar, tasting the fear afresh, seeing the blade in Dani’s screaming mouth, blood and steel shimmering in the moonlight.

He had to summon all his strength to say the next words, and it hurt to hear himself say them but say them he did. ‘If it is a test, then I am sure to fail.’

Ethan shut his eyes in sad response. ‘We’re *this close*, Jayadeep.’

He was almost whispering.

The Ghost nodded. He too longed to see the artefact. For years he had dreamed of bearing witness to its unearthly lightshow. But on the other hand …

‘This artefact could be nothing more than a trinket. Even the Templars know nothing of its true potential.’

‘Scrolls are cryptic. That’s the point of them. They’re passed down through the ages so that our forefathers should think themselves more clever than we.’

‘Yes. That’s what he said, more or less.’

‘How perceptive of him. Perhaps he also pointed out that, trinket or not, the artefact’s actual powers are less important than the perception of their worth. Yes, it’s true that what lies beneath the earth may be an ancient bauble fit for nothing more devastating than entrancing old dames and impressionable children. But for centuries Assassins and Templars have fought over artefacts, and we have all heard the tales of their great power: the Koh-i-Noor diamond, the unearthly force unleashed by the Apple of Al Mualim … Is it possible, perhaps, that these tales have become exaggerated in the telling? After all, none of these artefacts have ever been so powerful they proved decisive in the war. And the scrolls are as good at aggrandizement as they are at being abstruse.’

‘My parents …’

‘Your parents are a case in point, bouncing you on their knee, filling your head with the tales of the artefacts’ awesome power.’ He looked across at The Ghost, who returned his gaze, not quite able to believe what he was hearing, and gave a dry chuckle. ‘Evie’s like you. She’s fascinated by the idea of artefacts just as you were fascinated by that stupid bloody diamond.’

The Ghost bit down on his anger, saying nothing.

‘It’s the fascination with it, do you see? *The idea of it*. That’s where the talismanic power of the artefact lies. Assassin or Templar, we’re all in the business of selling ideas to the masses, and we all think our ideas are the ones to save the world, but one thing we have in common is the knowledge that these artefacts contain secrets of the First Civilization. Look around you …’ He indicated the false house in which they sat, the tunnel through which underground trains – *underground trains* – would soon travel. ‘We have steam power. Soon we will have electricity. The world is advancing at an almost unimaginable, unthinkable rate. The twentieth century is almost upon us and the twentieth century is the future, Jayadeep. The technology being used to build bridges, tunnels and railways – that same technology will be harnessed to create weapons of war. That’s the future. And unless you want to see man enslaved by tyranny and totalitarianism, then we need to win that future for our children and all the generations to come, who will one day sit with storybooks and read of our exploits and thank us for refusing to deliver them into despotism.

‘In other words, Jayadeep, we need to win at all costs. And that means you kill Pearson and the mission continues until we have recovered the artefact.’

It was quite a speech. The Ghost let it sink in.

Then: ‘No,’ he said.

Ethan leapt angrily to his feet. ‘Damn you, man!’ he roared, too loudly for the still night. Then he bit his tongue and turned away from the steam hole to gaze angrily and unseeingly at the false brick-front of the house.

‘I cannot kill an innocent man in cold blood,’ insisted The Ghost. ‘Surely, after everything that has happened, you know that? Or is your desire for the artefact making you as blind to the truth as my father was?’

Ethan turned and pointed. ‘He wasn’t the only one who was blind, my dear boy. You yourself thought you were ready, I seem to recall.’

‘I have more self-knowledge now. I know you’re asking me to do something I simply cannot do.’

There was a catch in his voice, and Ethan softened to see the boy so wrought with despair: a boy brought up to kill for his cause but incapable of doing so. Once again he thought what a sad world, what an obscene state of affairs, when we mourned a man’s inability to kill.

‘Inform Cavanagh you plan to use a blowpipe. You can tell him you learnt its use in Bombay.’

‘But, master, I can’t kill an innocent man.’

‘You won’t have to.’

49

It was evening and with her breath held, Evie Frye crouched outside her father's study as he sat with George Westhouse; the two men were talking in such low voices that she could barely hear them through the door. She tucked her hair behind her ear as she strained to listen.

'Tomorrow then, Ethan,' George was saying.

'Yes, tomorrow.'

'And if all goes well, then the artefact …'

'They're close, they say.'

'Well, logic dictates they must be. After all, the tunnel is built.'

'There are dozens of service tunnels, re-routed sewer pipes and gas mains still to install. There's plenty of digging to be done yet. Besides, who's to say the burst sewer in the Fleet Valley wasn't their doing?'

'True …'

Just then there came a knock on the front door downstairs that startled Evie, and she stood quickly, slightly disorientated, before smoothing herself down and then going to answer it. They had no servants. Ethan would not have allowed it, believing the very idea of retaining servants went against the tenets of the creed. And so it was that young Evie Frye answered her own front door.

There on the step stood a young Indian man wearing a brown suit. He was handsome, she thought, and yet there was something about him that offset his good looks, a wild and hunted expression that he fixed on her, regarding her from the grey lower steps with eyes that didn't really see her. Nevertheless, when he proffered a letter he said her name. 'Evie Frye.'

She took it, a folded piece of paper. On the flap was written: *For the attention of Ethan Frye*.

'Tell him that Ajay came,' said the man on the doorstep, already turning to leave. 'Tell him Ajay said he is sorry and that he will see him in the next life.'

Rattled, Evie was glad to close the door on the strange, haunted man – then rushed to her father's room.

A second later the household was in uproar.

‘*Jacob*,’ called Ethan, storming out of his study with his forearm extended, buckling his hidden blade at the same time. ‘Arm yourself, you’re coming with me. Evie, you too. George, come on, there’s no time to waste.’

He had unfolded the letter in a burst of panic, only to find a note written in code they had no time to translate. But Ajay – the man with the cryptic apology … Surely this was not the same Ajay who stood guard at The Darkness? Because if that man was in London then Ethan should have been informed … But then again, who else could it be?

All four of them came bursting into the street, Ethan still buckling the blade, holstering his revolver and pulling on his robes at the same time, the two children thrilling to the sight of their father in action.

‘Which way did he go, darling?’ said Ethan to Evie.

She pointed. ‘Towards the Broadway.’

‘Then we’re in luck. There are sewer works on The Broadway; he will have to turn on to Oakley Lane. Evie, Jacob, George, get after him. With any luck he’ll take George to be me and not suspect I’ve worked my way in front of him. Go. *Go*.’

The two young Assassins and George took off in the direction of the Broadway. Ethan ran for a wall that belonged to an opposite neighbour, and with a leap and a fast tap-tap of his boots, almost as though he were kicking the wall in mid-air, was on top and then over it.

In front of him stretched the garden, and gazing along it, he experienced a brief moment of involuntary garden jealousy. He’d always wondered what size garden the neighbours had and here was his answer. Bigger. Twice the size of his own. Keeping to the shadows, he ran its length and then at the bottom, where even the gardeners feared to tread, he drew his hidden blade to hack at the undergrowth. Succumbing to the foliage at the back was a wall, but he scaled it easily before dropping to a passageway on the other side.

All was quiet. Just the ever-present drip-drip of water. He strained to hear, picking out sounds from the distant surrounding city, until it came to him, a faraway rhythmic thud of running feet to his right.

Excellent. Ethan set off, darting quietly along the passageway to the end and then waited in the shadows, listening again. The running feet were closer now. Good. Ajay had seen his pursuers and was taking evasive action. All his attention would be concentrated on what came from behind.

Drainpipe, loose brick, window ledge – and then Ethan was on the roof of the adjacent building, framed against the moonlit sky but knowing his quarry was unlikely to look upwards. He was almost directly above the running footsteps in

the alleyway below and he sprinted ahead, dashing to the end of the tenement then jumping to the pitched roof of the next.

Flattening himself to the shingles he looked down into the street below and watched as a figure in a brown suit hurried into the alleyway, throwing a look behind himself at the same time.

Ethan’s robes fluttered as he swung to the lip of the roof then let himself down to the cobbles below, where he took a seat on a crate and rested his chin in his hand as he awaited Ajay’s arrival.

50

Ajay didn’t see anything until it was too late and then was brought up short. Ex-Assassin though he was, he still thought like one, and he instantly appraised the situation and drew his kukri on the run, taking note of Ethan Frye’s position and posture – his body at rest, his leading hand hanging down by the side. And seeing an opponent who was too relaxed and too vulnerable to attack on his weaker side, it was to that flank that he directed his attack – fast and, if his assessments were correct, then decisively.

But, of course, his assessments were not correct. They were based on assumptions that Ethan had anticipated, and as Ajay’s kukri flashed towards him, the older man’s hand shot out from beneath his chin, his blade engaging at the same second. There was a ring of steel as Ajay’s sword was blocked in mid-air, and then a scream of pain as Ethan completed his move with a downward slash that sheared off half of Ajay’s hand and took the blade away from him.

The kukri dropped to the stone, along with a chunk of Ajay’s hand. In pain and disorientated as he was, he acted on instinct, ducking and spinning and kicking his sword back up the alley as he dived away from another attack.

Ethan came to his feet and took a few steps up the alleyway, still reeling from the shock of recognition – *Ajay, it is Ajay, how the hell did he get here?* – just as the other man reached his weapon, stumbled and with one hurt and bleeding hand clutched to his chest, snatched it up from the cobbles with his good one.

‘This is a fight you can no longer win,’ called Ethan. The other three had appeared in the alley behind them and Ajay heard, turning to see his exit barred and then swinging back to face Ethan again, knowing, surely, that all was lost.

‘Why did you come to my door? Why did you attack me?’ Ethan took two steps forward threateningly. ‘I don’t want to hurt you any more, but I will, if I have to.’

Again Ajay glanced behind him and back at Ethan, and then he stood up straight with his shoulders thrust back, and through a last wretched sob that bubbled up from some place of inner pain said, ‘I’m sorry. I’m sorry to you and I’m sorry to Kulpreet, and I’m sorry for everything I have done.’

And then he drew the blade across his own throat.

51

Later, when the children had gone to bed with the image of a choking, gurgling man painting the cobbles scarlet with his own blood still fresh in their heads, George and Ethan had retired to the study. Both were shaken by what had happened and troubled by the questions for which they had no ready answers, and so it was that they drank two glasses of Ethan's best Highland whisky before either of them even said a word.

(Which, having crept down from upstairs, Evie was there to overhear …)

'A new development then,' said George.

'You could say that.'

'Damnedest thing.'

Ethan stared off into nothing. He was thinking that he needed to send word to Amritsar first thing. Tell them they might be short an Assassin – and what news of Kulpreet?

He said, 'I suppose, on the bright side, it prepares the twins for their blooding.'

George gave a dry laugh as his friend's eyes came back to him. 'This letter –' he held out the document – 'shall we decode it?'

A short while later they sat at the study desk with the document and several Assassin codebooks open in front of them. And the translation. Ajay's note had read: *Position compromised, must abort. A friend.*

'"A friend" who's lying out there somewhere not far from Oakley Lane.' George set down the letter. The body would be discovered soon. At any moment the two Assassins expected to hear the sound of a peeler's rattle.

'The man out there died of shame,' said Ethan.

Outside Evie crouched, listening, thinking of Ajay, who had died of shame. She knew from her readings that in the annals of Assassins there was another, Ahmad Sofian, who had taken his life by the same means and for similar reasons.

'Shame. Indeed. It would seem so,' George was saying. 'A traitor to the creed. But how much has he told our enemy? What does he even know to tell them?

You've always been scrupulous with the information you've given me; I can't imagine what he could have told them.'

'Put it this way, George, if you and Ajay had got together then you might have been in possession of most of the facts. But one without the other? No chance.'

'Even so, you must inform your Ghost at once.'

Ethan chewed the inside of his cheek thoughtfully. 'I'm not sure. I know The Ghost. He will err on the side of caution and abort the mission.'

'Well, that's what the note says to do.' George leaned forward, his face clouding with incomprehension. 'I'm not quite sure I can believe what I'm hearing, Ethan. If you inform The Ghost and he decides to continue with the operation then he is guilty of rank and dangerous optimism at best, and a tendency to suicide at worst. If he aborts he will be doing the right thing; the course of action we would recommend if we were thinking with our heads instead of our desires. Either way, we must tell him so he is able to choose.'

Ethan shook his head. His mind was made up. 'I trust The Ghost. I trust him to look after himself. Most of all, I trust him to recover the artefact.'

'Then you must also trust him to make the right decisions.'

'No, George. I'm sorry, I can't do that.'

From far away came the familiar clacking of the peeler's alarm.

52

And so it came to pass. A day of great excitement. The Metropolitan Railway had placed an advertisement in the previous evening's newspapers to announce that tonight was a new beginning for the railway: Charles Pearson was to take a journey on the reopened stretch of line between King's Cross and Farringdon Street. Not only that but he would be making the journey in *an enclosed carriage*, said to be the last word in underground railway luxury. Other railway dignitaries would be present, said the notices, and members of the public were also invited to witness this grand occasion – just so long as they stayed on the right side of the picket fence.

And the public would come. Despite the excavation turning their lives into a living hell of noise and mud, closing roads and businesses alike, despite the fact that it had made thousands of already poverty-stricken Londoners homeless yet had had no discernible impact on the well-to-do, and despite the fact that it was over a year behind schedule and that the cost was now estimated at £1.3 million.

They would come.

A team of carpenters had been employed to build a set of steps down into the shaft at King's Cross. Unlike Gladstone's inaugural trip from Bishop's Road four months before, the underground station at King's Cross had yet to be built. Next year it would be constructed as an adjunct to the ten-year-old mainline station, with gables at either end, as well as pavilion roofs and parapets. What were currently cuttings acting as makeshift boarding points would be fashioned into proper platforms with stairways, ticket offices, kiosks set into the walls and footbridges at each end.

But for now, it was little more than an ugly hole in the ground, and to accommodate railway top brass and their wives, the steps were built, and the cuttings were laid with planks to best approximate a proper platform, and instead of the flares that the men had used for night work, there were to be lamps strung along the top of the trench, as well as inside the shaft.

It all added to the celebratory air. When the bell tolled three times at midday it was to signal the change, but on this occasion there was no next shift waiting to take over. The men were welcome to take their leave. They could stay and

watch, of course, just so long as they stayed on the right side of the fence, but they were also welcome to spend their free time supping ale in pubs called the Pickled Hen or the Curious Orange or the Rising Sun, or with their families; it was up to them. Either way, for the first time in two years there would be no clamour of tools in north-west London, no rattle of steam engines, no swinging leather buckets silhouetted against the skyline. No constantly grinding conveyor.

Not that navvies were to be absent from the site. ‘We want the bigwigs seeing proper workers, not that bloody rabble,’ Marchant had said, and so a squad of ‘pretend’ workmen had been drafted in. At first glance this new group of thirty or forty navvies looked the part as they milled about in time-honoured navvy fashion, but a closer look revealed that they were smarter and more serious-looking than their regular counterparts. What’s more, as they stood awaiting the arrival of the dignitaries, there were no jokes or laughter, no lolling around or snatching each other’s caps and setting up impromptu games of cricket. The Ghost knew that these powerful-looking navvies were more than mere decoration. They were Templar men.

As day became night he knew one other thing too. Not only could he not take the life of an innocent man; he could not allow it to be taken.

53

Abberline had heard about the exhibition journey but went home to see Aubrey first. ‘You think you can make it down?’ he asked him.

‘No, Freddie, but you pop along if you’ve a mind. Say hello to the old gang for me. You going in uniform, are you?’

Abberline looked down at himself. ‘I figure our friends will have more on their minds than looking out for me. Plus I can make my way through the crowds more easily as a peeler. There are still some who have respect for the law. Oh, one more thing.’

From the draw of his roll-top desk, Abberline took a naval spyglass that he extended then closed with a satisfying *click click*. ‘Think I might be needing this,’ he said, and with that he took his leave into the balmy September evening, feeling a little guilty about leaving Aubrey behind, truth be told; after all, it wasn’t so long ago that he, Abberline, had been the one to brood, with Aubrey doing his best to shake him out of it. How was Abberline returning the favour? Exactly. He wasn’t. He was off gawping at big nobs taking train rides when he should have been investigating whatever fiddle it was Cavanagh had going. Fraud was his best guess. Some kind of embezzlement scam. It was the not-knowing that was the problem – the not knowing how to make it safe for Aubrey to rejoin his family.

Lost in thought, he made his way along a roadway crowded with traffic, where the air seemed to crackle with the constant trundle of horse and carriage. An omnibus passed, packed with men on the upper deck, and to Abberline their top hats were like chimneys. In the distance smokestacks poisoned the East End with ribbons of thick black smog.

Just as predicted, the crowds were heavy at King’s Cross and he was glad of his bobby’s uniform as he elbowed his way through to the fence surrounding the site. *Hypocrite*, he thought. You’re not above using your own status when it suits you. Around him was the usual crowd attracted by such events: families with children on parents’ shoulders, sightseers, men in suits and women in bonnets – a general air of expectation. Abberline put them to his back and stood with his

hands on the fence posts feeling like a man imprisoned as he stared out across the site.

What a change it was from usual. Where the shaft was, he could see a new wooden structure with steps leading downwards. The whole site had been spruced up. Wagons and carts were lined neatly at the far end of the site, and there were no mountains of spoil awaiting their turn to be taken away. Just an empty apron of mud, a series of lit glaziers providing light, and then the trench itself, where lamps had been strung up so that it looked almost pretty, like a fairground.

As for the tunnel, it was mostly covered. What had spent so long as a groove in the earth was now a bone fide railway line. All, that was, apart from one short stretch nearest to the newly built steps, which awaited the covering process. Aside from that, Abberline was looking at a real underground railway.

There they were, the men who had helped it happen: various Metropolitan Railway bigwigs that he didn't recognize, as well as a few familiar faces: Cavanagh, Marchant, two of the punishers, Smith and Other Hardy (and that was a point, where was the third, the charming Hardy?) You had to hand it to the murdering scum, he thought. Whatever their racket, whatever their fiddle, whatever crime they had perpetrated in the name of the underground railway, they'd done it. They got the bugger built.

With them was the Indian lad, Bharat Singh. Abberline trained his spyglass on that handsome implacable face. There was something different about him today, thought the peeler. His eyes seemed to move nervously. Abberline kept his spyglass to his eye as, with introductions over, the group began to move across the apron and towards the new steps, the railway company men breaking into a polite smattering of applause as they passed.

The group reached the steps, but before descending were due to greet a gang of foremen. Mr and Mrs Charles Pearson were ushered forward. There was more shaking of hands as they were introduced to the foremen by Bharat Singh.

When that was over, Cavanagh thanked the foremen and, with doffed caps, they left. Bharat went to move away as well, to follow the foremen, but Abberline saw Cavanagh's hand shoot out, take Bharat by the upper arm and usher him towards the steps instead.

Then they were gone. The cap-doffing foremen moved away, the railway bigwigs stood consulting their watches, awaiting their turn, and the line of navvies stayed where it was – a guard of honour, or maybe just a guard – and a curious silence descended. Until from the tunnel came the whistle of a steam engine, and great chuffs of smoke passed through the planks of the uncovered section as the driver stoked his engine.

The train was about to pull off.

Further along the fence was an enclosure where the bigwigs' carriages were tethered. There stood drivers chatting, smoking pipes or tending to their horses.

There was nothing unusual about the scene, but even so Abberline's gaze went to it, his eyeglass lingering there. For some reason he was sure he'd seen something out of place, as though he'd walked into a familiar room in which a piece of furniture had been moved.

Then it hit him. How the devil had he missed it for so long? Standing there at the fence, bold as brass and with his eyes on the events at the tunnel, was a man in white robes.

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The Ghost had seen the future. It was a future in which he was inducted as a Templar, and the more he was trusted by them, the closer to their inner circle he went, and the more value he had for the Assassins.

Which meant they wouldn't let him leave. Even when this operation was over, they would make him stay, and he would have to do it because the innocent life of Charles Pearson had paid his way to purgatory.

He wasn't prepared to do that, and so he'd decided that when Cavanagh dismissed him he would go to the carriage enclosure as arranged and there he would tell Ethan his decision. That he was out.

Disarm Ethan if necessary. Hurt him if needs be. But end this right now.

Except Cavanagh hadn't dismissed him. Instead the director had ushered him towards the steps – 'You know, I've changed my mind, I really think you should see this.' – and he had descended with the rest of the party.

He'd flashed his boss a quizzical look. *I should be taking up position*. But Cavanagh dismissed it with a quick don't-worry shake of his head. Why? His mind raced. Would there be time afterwards? Was that the game Cavanagh was playing? Was this all part of an ongoing test of The Ghost's mettle?

Or was it something else?

At the makeshift platform stood a locomotive and two carriages. The group proceeded to the front one and Cavanagh led the way inside.

'As you can see, our newest carriage is most commodious,' said Cavanagh, welcoming the Pearsons into it with a flourish. 'Compartments and arm-rests in first class make overcrowding impossible, while the leather-upholstered chairs mean that even our second-class passengers will enjoy the utmost comfort at all times.'

'There are no windows,' said Mrs Pearson with a touch of panic in her voice.

'Ah yes,' said Cavanagh. 'But windows are not necessary in an underground train, Mrs Pearson. Besides, first-class passengers shall have the benefit of gas lighting. The gas is carried in long India-rubber bags in boxes on top of the carriages, and when we pull off you will see that the gas lighting easily provides enough light by which to read a morning newspaper.'

They took their seats, with the Pearsons and Cavanagh at the far end, and the rest towards the rear, where a door provided a portal through to the second carriage.

Pearson thumped the tip of his cane excitedly on the boards. The driver appeared at the open door, gave them a thumbs up with a gloved hand, grinned at the dignitaries, and then closed the door and went back to the locomotive. Gas lamps flickered but the darkness was kept at bay, just as Cavanagh had said it would.

With a clank and a trundle, the train moved off.

The Ghost felt Marchant's gaze on him. Smith and Other Hardy were staring at him too. All had the eyes of men who were hungry for their supper. The absence of Hardy – so far unexplained – began to gnaw at him. At the other end of the carriage, the Pearsons and Cavanagh kept up a polite conversation but The Ghost wasn't listening. He was wondering what malice lay behind the stares of his companions.

The train pulled in at Farringdon Street and let out a great belch of smoke. Moments later the driver opened the carriage door and peered inside to check on his passengers, as well as basking in the compliments on the smooth journey from Mr and Mrs Pearson. A short while later, and they were on the move for the return journey to King's Cross, Mr Pearson reaching for his pocket watch to check the journey time.

But …

'My watch,' he said, fumbling for it but not finding it.

The train clanked on.

'What is it, dear?' said Mrs Pearson. Cavanagh had leaned forward with false concern. The Ghost began to feel a new onset of dread, daring to hope that the Solicitor of London had merely misplaced his pocket watch, but knowing somehow that there was more to it than that, knowing that whatever it was involved him.

All eyes in the carriage were on Pearson now, watching as he patted his belly. 'No, no. My watch and chain is definitely gone.'

'When did you last have it, dear?' Speaking loudly over the noise of the engine, Mrs Pearson's voice seemed to shake with the movement of the train.

'I can't remember.'

Other Hardy called out from the end of the carriage. 'You had it on the platform, sir –' he flashed a grin at The Ghost before continuing – 'if you don't mind me saying so, sir, because I saw you take it out and consult it.'

'Oh well, that's a relief, then it must be around here somewhere …' Pearson planted his cane on the boards and got shakily to his feet, already struggling with

the movement of the train.

‘Charles, sit down,’ admonished Mrs Pearson. ‘Mr Cavanagh, if you would be so kind as to ask your men to look for the watch …’

‘Of course, madam.’

As Marchant and the two punishers went through the motions of looking, The Ghost’s mind raced, desperately trying to come up with a solution. He surreptitiously checked the pockets of his jacket, just in case the watch had been planted on him, and then raising his eye to the two punishers, caught them smirking at him.

No, they hadn’t planted the watch on him. Not yet.

‘No, no watch here,’ said Marchant, steadying himself with a hand on the carriage shell.

The Ghost sat motionless as though watching the whole scene through glass. Cavanagh was sticking to the script, a picture of false concern for poor Pearson’s missing pocket watch. ‘Then I must ask that you men turn out your pockets,’ he said. ‘No, better still … turn out each other’s pockets.’

They did as they were asked. They went through the charade. The Ghost was near rigid with tension now. Knowing where this was going but unable to do anything about it.

He felt a tugging at his coat. ‘Oh dear, sir,’ said Smith or it might have been Other Hardy, but it didn’t matter, because the trap was sprung. ‘I believe I may have found Mr Pearson’s watch. It was in the pocket of young Bharat here.’

Smith took the watch to Pearson who identified it and, with a rueful look at The Ghost, replaced it in his hip pocket. Meanwhile, Cavanagh had stood, the very picture of fury, a man whose trust had been betrayed in the worst possible circumstance. ‘Is this true?’ He glared at The Ghost. ‘Did you take the watch?’

The Ghost said nothing, just stared at him, mute.

Cavanagh turned to his guests. ‘Mr and Mrs Pearson, I offer you my sincerest apologies. This is quite unprecedented. We shall place Bharat under arrest. Mrs Pearson, may I ask that one of my men accompany you to an adjoining carriage, away from this young thief? I fear he could well turn nasty.’

‘Yes, dear,’ said Pearson, concern etched on his face. ‘You should go.’

Marchant wobbled up the carriage towards Mrs Pearson, giving her an oily grin as he held out his hand in order to accompany her away from the nasty mess that was to come. She left, meek as a lamb, with a fearful, uncomprehending look at The Ghost as she passed.

Now they were alone.

And then, just as the train pulled into King’s Cross, Cavanagh drew a pearl-handled knife and plunged it into Pearson’s chest.

55

Cavanagh opened the carriage door in order to call out to the driver, congratulating him on a smooth journey and telling him they would alight presently.

And then he closed the door and turned back to where Pearson lay with his legs kicking feebly as the life ebbed out of him. Cavanagh had hammered the knife directly into his heart before withdrawing the blade, and Pearson hadn't made a sound; in the next carriage his wife was oblivious to the fact that the Metropolitan Railway director had just stabbed him to death.

Anticipating The Ghost might make a move, the two punishers had grabbed him, pinning him to his seat. Cavanagh smiled. 'Oh my God,' he said, 'the young Indian ruffian has killed Charles Pearson.' He wiped his blade clean on Pearson's body and sheathed it, then looked at The Ghost. 'You would never have done it, would you?'

The Ghost looked at him, trying to give away nothing but sensing it was too late for that anyway.

'"*Blowpipe*", that was good,' said Cavanagh. 'I liked that. You telling me you wanted to use a blowpipe gave me everything I needed to know. It told Mr Hardy everything he needed to know too, and he's gone with a squad of men to apprehend or possibly kill, I can't say I am much troubled either way, your friend and my enemy, Ethan Frye.'

The train seemed to relax as the locomotive exhaled steam. The Ghost thought of Ethan. The born-warrior Ethan, an expert in multiple combatant situations. But careless Ethan, prone to error.

'He is as good as dead, Jayadeep, as are you. Ah, that surprises you, does it? That I know your name. Know your name, know your weakness, know your protector would be along to take over a job you didn't have the backbone to complete. The jig is up, I'm afraid. You played a good game, but you lost. Mr Pearson is dead, the Assassins are finished and I have my artefact.'

The Ghost couldn't disguise another look of surprise.

'Ah yes, I have the artefact,' smiled Cavanagh, enjoying his moment. 'Or should I say –' he reached to scoop up Pearson's cane – 'I have it now.'

He presented the cane up and The Ghost saw that its handle was a bronze-tinged sphere about three inches in diameter. ‘There,’ said Cavanagh, and his eyes were aflame, his lips pulled back over his teeth, a strange and ugly look of love at first sight. ‘*This* is the artefact. Recovered by labourers some weeks ago and given to Mr Pearson as a token of their esteem. And Mr Pearson liked it so much he made it his cane handle. But Mr Pearson walks with the angels now. And he won’t be needing his cane.’

Standing at the carriage enclosure, Ethan Frye had watched the dignitaries descend the steps and wondered why they’d taken The Ghost – and tried to dismiss a queasy sense that maybe something was going wrong.

Next he’d seen the great smoke emissions as the train pulled out of King’s Cross, and he’d waited as it went to Farringdon Street then returned, and he’d stood patiently, awaiting the emergence of Mr and Mrs Pearson, daring to believe that all would still go to plan. *I’m sorry, Mr Pearson*, he thought, and reached for the blowpipe beneath his robes.

From within the ranks of carriages, Ethan was being watched. He was being watched by a man who drew a knife that glinted in the moonlight, who when he smiled, revealed a gold tooth.

Coming closer, Abberline saw that he wasn’t the only one making his way towards the enclosure. From among the crowds a group of labourers had materialized and were moving in on it too. He stopped and lifted out his spyglass, leaning forward over the fence to train it on the man in robes. He stayed where he was, oblivious to the approaching danger, still starkly visible, yet somehow invisible. Abberline saw that he held something by his side and it looked like … Good God, was that a blowpipe?

Now he swung his spyglass to peer into the thicket of carriages. The navvies were still approaching, and also …

Abberline caught his breath. If it wasn’t his old friend Hardy. The punisher had his back to him but it was unmistakably him. Abberline watched as Hardy caught sight of one of the labourers and tipped him a wink.

The trap was about to be sprung.

Abberline began to move towards the enclosure more quickly. He no longer cared about robed men and whether they fought for good or bad. What he cared about was giving Hardy a greeting from Aubrey, and his truncheon was in his hand as he pushed his way through the crowds then vaulted the enclosure fence. He threaded his way through the parked coaches. Once more he was glad of his peeler’s threads when one of the oncoming navvies saw him approach and

turned smartly on his heel, feigning interest in something behind him. He was a few feet from Hardy now, and the punisher still had his back to him, still watching the man in robes. What he and the man in robes had in common was that both thought themselves the hunter, not the prey, and that was why Abberline was able to come up behind Hardy undetected.

'Excuse me, sir, but can I ask what business you have in the carriage enclosure?'

'*Business*,' said Hardy, turning. 'It's none of your bloody business is what it –'

He never said the word 'is'.

As it turned out, he would never say the word 'is' again, because Abberline swung as hard with the truncheon as he could and it was a vicious attack and not one worthy of an officer of the law, but Abberline had stopped thinking like an officer of the law. He was thinking about the weeks of pain. He was thinking about the scars made by a brass knuckleduster. He was thinking about a man who had been left for dead. And he swung that truncheon with all of his might, and in the next moment Hardy had a mouthful of blood and teeth and an appointment with the dirt at his feet.

To his right Abberline saw a powerful navvy snarling as he came to him with a cosh in one hand. There were other navvies coming too, but through the carriages Abberline caught a glimpse of the man in robes, who was now aware of the disturbance at his back and was turning, tensing. At the same time, Abberline felt the navvy's cosh slam against his temple and it felled him, dazed, his eyes watering and head howling in pain, just a few feet away from where Hardy was already pulling himself to his knees, with his chin hanging at a strange angle and his eyes ablaze with fury – and a knife that streaked out of the darkness towards Abberline.

Abberline rolled but then found himself pinned by the legs and feet of the navvy, looking up to see the man towering over him, a knife in his hand.

'*He's mine*,' said Hardy, although because of his injury it sounded more like *hismon*, but the navvy knew what he meant and stayed his hand as Hardy, his lower face a mask of blood, lurched towards Abberline, his elbow pulling back about to strike with the knife.

'*Stop*,' said the man in the robes, and Hardy jerked to a halt mid-strike as he felt the mechanism of the Assassin's hidden blade at his neck.

'Call off your man,' said Ethan.

They heard the running feet of reinforcements.

Hardy spoke, and through his broken jaw and teeth it sound like *gufferell* but Ethan Frye knew what he meant and engaged his blade and it tore through Hardy's throat, emerging blood-streaked and gleaming from beneath his chin. At

the same time Ethan drew his revolver with his other hand. A blast tore the night and the navvy pinning Abberline spun away. Ethan wheeled. His revolver spoke again and again, and more bodies fell among the carriages. At the first shot panic had taken over the crowd and their screams spooked the horses. Terrified coachmen flung themselves to the ground.

Ethan was empty but the attack had faded and so he dashed to where Abberline lay. ‘I’m Ethan Frye,’ he said, reaching out to help Abberline off the dirt. ‘And it appears I owe you a favour. I will not forget this, Constable Abberline. The Brotherhood likes to pay its debts. Now, if you will excuse me, I have some pressing business to attend to.’

And with that he vaulted the fence and took off over the mud towards the shaft. Men in suits scattered at the sight of this wild figure pounding over the planks towards them. More importantly the squad of navvies at the tunnel edge saw him coming too, but with just four of them between him and the steps, he wasn’t too concerned, and he flipped the blowpipe from beneath his robes. Still on the run he plucked two darts from his belt, clamped them between his teeth, brought the blowpipe up to the first dart, loaded and fired.

The closest man fell with a poison-tipped dart in the neck. Out of deference to Pearson Ethan had assembled an expensive poison that was painless and fast-acting. Apart from the prick at his neck, he wouldn’t have felt a thing. Had he known he’d be using them on Templars, he would have dipped them in the cheap stuff.

He reloaded. Spat the second dart. Another man fell. A third drew a cutlass from under his jacket and came forward, cursing Ethan. His mouth shone with saliva and he was slow, and Ethan took no pride in deflecting his first blow, anticipating an easy scooping strike and then stepping into his body and jabbing back with the blade. He whirled swiftly away to avoid the dying man’s final blood-flecked cough and met the last man at the same time. This one was better, faster, more of a problem. Again, this one had a cutlass, and again he began with a chopping strike that Ethan knocked away, trading two more blows before driving his blade home.

The other navvies were closing in, but he reached the structure first, not bothering with the steps themselves, shinning down the timber uprights until his boots met the planks of the makeshift platform, and there before him stood the stationary train. Nothing strange about it at first glance.

Then he felt the earth move. A rumble. An unmistakable movement. Enough to rock him on his feet. The timbers on the unfinished tunnel roof began to tumble.

Inside the carriage The Ghost had watched as Cavanagh bent and smashed the cane on the floor, pulling the orb from the shaft that he tossed away. Smiling, the triumphant director held up the artefact for inspection. Greedy eyes went from the bronze globe to The Ghost; the two punishers goggled and even The Ghost felt a tremor of something indefinable in the air, as though the artefact had found its worshippers and was showing itself to them. He thought of lightshows and depthless knowledge and understanding – and then saw death and destruction, and great explosions on battlefields, and wondered what he had helped unleash on the world. His job had been to recover that artefact. At the very least prevent it from falling into the hands of the enemy. He had failed.

'Can you feel it?' Cavanagh was saying. The sphere seemed to glow in his hand and, yes, unless they were all experiencing the same hallucination, they could all feel it.

It was humming.

Suddenly the door to the adjoining carriage was flung open and Marchant was back, slamming the connecting door and cutting them off from Mrs Pearson, oblivious Mrs Pearson, who no doubt wondered when they were due to disembark.

'Ethan Frye's coming,' said Marchant breathlessly. At once the waves of energy that seemed to pulse from the orb increased in intensity.

'*What?*' said Cavanagh.

'Mrs Pearson wanted to be let out, so I opened the door and saw Ethan Frye at the top of the steps.'

'Did he see you?'

'Back to me. He had his back to –'

The door to the carriage opened. At the same time, lightning fast, Cavanagh whirled and threw his knife, and there was a short scream from the doorway.

Ethan, thought The Ghost. But it was the train driver's body that fell into the carriage.

They all felt it. The earth seemed to move. There was a distinct rumble and Cavanagh looked at the object he held, fixing it with a terrible, power-drunk gaze. And was it The Ghost's imagination or did it seem to glow more brightly – almost boastfully? *Look at me. Look at what I can do.*

And then the world caved in.

56

The slippage caused the surrounding banks to move. And though the tunnel held, the makeshift roof above the carriage was dislodged and came tumbling, clattering and crashing to the carriage below. The roof cracked and gave, showering those inside with splinters and it gave The Ghost just the chance he needed. He wrenched himself free of the punishers.

‘Ethan,’ he called, and crashed through the door into the adjoining carriage, where Mrs Pearson sat screaming and terrified with her hands over her head and then at the sight of The Ghost screamed even more loudly.

He yanked open the carriage door, leapt out on to the platform – and almost barged into Ethan Frye.

‘Kill him,’ called Cavanagh with a voice that sounded as though it had been dragged from the very pits of hell. ‘Kill them both.’

The two punishers burst out of the carriage door, blocking the way forward, oncoming navvies behind. Other Hardy reached into his suit jacket, hand appearing with a revolver aimed at The Ghost.

Unwavering, The Ghost met him, wishing he had a blade but settling for the toughened edge of his bare foot instead, seeming almost to pivot in the air as he leapt, knocking the revolver away with one kick, then wrenching the man’s head back with a strike to the chin from his trailing foot.

The weapon spun away and the two men both sprawled to the deck, but The Ghost was the first to react, kicking again but this time to the underside of Other Hardy’s chin and hearing a crunch in return that meant he was either dead or out for the count. The Ghost wasn’t too bothered either way.

At the same time Ethan had the pleasure of Smith’s company. The second punisher had drawn a long-bladed dirk and came forward slashing haphazardly, with not a cat in hell’s chance of besting the Assassin. Sure enough, Ethan stepped smartly away, and felt the reassuring tickle of the mechanism on his forearm as his blade engaged before he buried it in the man’s neck.

Suddenly the earthquake seemed to increase in intensity and at the same time Cavanagh stepped out of the carriage and on to the platform in front of them. His

knife was still buried in the train driver but he had no need of it now. Not now he had the artefact. It glowed and seemed to pulse in time with the tremors.

Twenty feet away, Ethan and The Ghost exchanged a fearful look as Cavanagh held the artefact before him, as though proffering it to the gods, and there was a great moan of traumatized wood, and then a sudden increase in the deluge from above. In the distance came the screams of spectators terrified by the sudden earthquake – an earthquake that was increasing in intensity now as behind the glowing artefact, Cavanagh's face split into a maniacal grin, his eyes changing, until the man who had spent his life burying his humanity in favour of ambition and corruption had no more humanity left.

He hadn't noticed Marchant edging closer to him.

He didn't see that Marchant had retrieved the pearl-handled knife from the body of the train driver.

'Crawford Starrick sends his regards,' shouted the clerk above the crashing of the shaft around them, and then buried the knife into Cavanagh's armpit.

The director's eyes widened in pain and shock and incomprehension at the sudden turn of events. Straightaway the artefact's rhythmic pulse faded as he sank to his knees with his suit front already gleaming darkly with blood. He looked from Marchant to the two Assassins, then fell forward. And perhaps in that final moment a little of himself returned, enough to ponder on the evil he had done, before he left this world with a wet choking noise as his lungs filled and he drowned in his own blood, and The Ghost hoped that the unnamed sepoy was there to greet him in hell.

The navvies swarmed on to the platform behind them as Marchant snatched up the artefact – and Ethan Frye leapt forward to relieve him of it, all of which happened in the split second before a falling piece of timber ignited the gas supplies on the roof of one of the carriage, and the Metropolitan Railway's brand-new enclosed carriage burst into flames.

57

Ethan and The Ghost dived for cover, flinging themselves into the tunnel. Behind them was fire and pandemonium and noise, and then after a moment, during which the after-effects of the explosion died down, they heard Marchant screaming at the navvies – ‘Get them! Get after them!’ – and they took to their heels, heading west, back towards Paddington.

‘I have something to tell you,’ said Ethan as they ran. They pounded in between the train tracks in total darkness, sharpened senses leading them along the tunnel as fast as they dared, until they found themselves beneath the steam hole at Leinster Gardens, where they pulled themselves up to safety. Sure enough the gang of navvies ran right below them. They didn’t even look up.

For a moment there was silence as both men tried and failed to make sense of what had just happened.

‘What do you have to tell me?’ asked The Ghost, his shoulders rising and falling as he kept his breath – dreading what he was about to hear.

Ethan sighed. ‘This is all my fault,’ he said. ‘I was warned.’

‘What do you mean, “warned”?’

Ethan told The Ghost about Ajay and watched sorrow cripple the man’s features.

‘How could you?’ said The Ghost at last.

Ethan was desolate. ‘I judged it for the best.’

‘You judged wrong.’

Again there was a silence, broken by Ethan, who said softly, ‘Was I the only one to make an error of judgement? How were they able to identify you, Jayadeep?’

The Ghost flashed him a furious look. ‘Anything I did was born of a desire to help my fellow man. Isn’t that the right way? Isn’t that the Assassin way?’

‘It is. But if you excuse yourself on those terms then you must excuse me, because I did what I did for the good of *all* men.’

‘You were as obsessed with that artefact as he was.’

‘If so, then I was obsessed with making sure it didn’t fall into the wrong hands, and now we’ve seen it in action I know I was right to be.’

The Ghost had been promised lightshows or a pretty talisman from the artefact. Instead he had witnessed something different altogether.

‘Well, it’s in the wrong hands now,’ he said.

‘Not for long.’

From below them came a shout. ‘Come on, mates. We’re to get to the tunnel.’

‘The coast will be clear soon,’ said Ethan, drumming his hands on the dirt in frustration, ‘but the artefact will be halfway to Starrick by now.’

The Ghost wasn’t listening. Let Ethan fixate on his artefacts. He no longer cared. He was thinking about the order they’d just heard. ‘The tunnel’. The Templars knew about Maggie – they knew that through her was a way to get to him, and through him a way to Ethan, and maybe just having the artefact was not enough. They meant to smash the Assassins as well.

‘I have to go to Maggie.’

‘I have to go after the artefact,’ said Ethan. ‘Just as your conscience dictates you must go to the tunnel, so I must go there.’

‘You should go after your precious artefact,’ said The Ghost, and then took to his feet.

It was a distance of some six miles from Leinster Gardens to the Thames Tunnel, plus the Templar men had a head start and were travelling by carriage, but The Ghost was fast and he was determined, and he knew the route well, and he made it within the hour.

Even so, he was too late. Wagons were already arranged around the octagonal marble entrance hall of the tunnel shaft. Figures were milling about, some of them holding lit flares and lamps. He saw other figures running, heard screaming and the unmistakable sound of coshes and truncheons being used in anger and the shouts of pain to match. The residents of the tunnel were accustomed to having their refuge invaded but not with such violence, not with so much malice or single-minded purpose.

And the purpose?

To take Maggie.

But he wasn’t going to let them do that. At this, he wasn’t going to fail.

Pandemonium reigned but through a forest of bodies The Ghost saw Other Hardy. The last surviving punisher stood at a carriage with his revolver in one hand and the other at his injured face, shouting orders. ‘Bring the woman, bring the old woman.’ There was no sign of Marchant, and The Ghost guessed Ethan was right: the artefact was on its way to Crawford Starrick. *Best of luck, Ethan. You made your choice.*

Running past a series of minor skirmishes outside, The Ghost burst into the octagonal hall. Over by the watch-house, the commotion was at its most heated. He saw the grey hair of Maggie amid a throng of bodies, some of them tunnel dwellers, some of them strongarms. She was shouting and cursing loudly as Templar thugs attempted to manhandle her over the turnstile. The tunnel people were trying to save her but they were ill-equipped to do so. Templar clubs and knives rose and fell, and shouts of resistance turned to screams of pain that rebounded from the glass. The Ghost thought he saw the private detective Hazlewood somewhere among the great mass of people but then the face was gone. A second later he realized that Other Hardy's urgings seemed to have stopped and then heard a voice from behind him, saying, 'Right, you little bastard …'

Other Hardy was right-handed. He was armed with a Webley that pulled to his right.

The Ghost took both factors into consideration as he ducked and wheeled at the same time, going inside Hardy's gun arm and pleased to hear the air part a good six inches away from his head a half-second before he heard the blast. There was a scream. One of the Templar thugs fell and that was one less man to deal with, he thought as he broke Hardy's arm, reached for the dirk that hung sheathed at the punisher's waist and then thrust it into his chest.

Other Hardy reached for The Ghost and their eyes were just inches apart as The Ghost watched the light of life die in the other man's eyes – and he experienced a wave of something that was part sickness and part despair, a great hollowing out inside him as he took a life.

Maggie had seen him. 'Bharat!' she screeched from among the brawl at the turnstile, and Templar thugs turned away from the commotion, saw The Ghost standing over their boss as he slid lifelessly to the mosaic floor, and moved closer to attack.

The Ghost tossed the knife from one hand to the other, disorientating the first thug who came forward. Brave man. Stupid man. He died in seconds, and now The Ghost had two blades, the dirk and a cutlass, and used them both to open the throat of a second attacker, then spun, jabbing backhand with the cutlass and opening the stomach of a third. He was an expert swordsman, skilled in the business of death. He took no pleasure in it. Simply, he was good at it.

By now Maggie had been reclaimed by the tunnel people and taken back to the sanctuary of the steps, and perhaps the Templar thugs knew the game was up; perhaps seeing three of their comrades fall so quickly at the hands of the barefoot Indian lad had made them decide that discretion was the better part of valour; or perhaps the death of Other Hardy took whatever spirit they had left,

because a cry went up, ‘Time to go, mates, time to go,’ and the beatings stopped as the thugs streamed out of the hall and headed for their carriages.

In a matter of moments the hall had emptied and then the area outside had too, and the tunnel was no longer under attack.

The Ghost stood with his shoulders rising and falling as he caught his breath. He let the dirk and the cutlass fall to the floor with a dull clang that reverberated around the room, and then he walked towards the turnstile, climbing over and heading down the steps.

The rotunda was a mass of people and there were cheers for him as he descended.

‘Maggie?’ he asked a woman he knew and she pointed him along the tunnel.

‘They took her up there to safety,’ she said, before stealing a kiss and then clapping him on the back.

The tunnel dwellers kept up the cheering as he passed through the rotunda and into the tunnel itself, leaving the press of people and the shock and excitement of the battle behind.

He had already decided that he no longer belonged to the Brotherhood; nor would he ever speak to Ethan Frye again. Let the Assassins and Templars fight it out among themselves. He would stay here, with his people. This was where he belonged.

A thought occurred to him. *They took her up there to safety*.

Who had taken her to safety?

He remembered seeing the face of the private detective in the melee. He broke into a run. ‘Maggie!’ he screamed, dashing up the tunnel towards the berth they shared, where she had tended the fire and doled out broth and received her rightful love as tunnel mother.

He found her there.

She lay in the dirt.

Whoever had killed her had stabbed her multiple times, shredding her smock. Her grey witchy hair was flecked with blood. Her eyes that so often blazed with fury and mirth and passion were dull in death.

They had pinned a note to her chest. *We consider the debt settled*.

The Ghost sank to his haunches and held Maggie. He took her head in his lap and the tunnel dwellers heard his cries as he wailed his grief and despair.

Part Three

Metropolis Rising

58

Cold and damp and gripped by melancholy, the Assassin George Westhouse shivered in the sidings of Croydon rail yard. Was it that a tired pall hung over all of England? Or did it hang over him? There was a storm brewing, he thought. Both literally and metaphorically.

It was February 1868, five and a half years after the wretched events at the Metropolitan line. After that, he, Ethan Frye and The Ghost had retired in failure: The Ghost to his hidey-hole in the Thames Tunnel, a self-imposed prison of regret and recrimination; George to batten down the hatches in Croydon; and Ethan to busy himself with raising the next generation of Assassin resistance – one unencumbered by the disappointment and failure that tainted their elders. A new generation with fresh ambition and enthusiasm. A new way of doing things.

What a shame, George thought, *that Ethan will never see it in action*.

Ethan had been just forty-three years old when he died a matter of weeks ago, but he had been ill with the pleurisy for some time before that. During many hours spent at Ethan's bedside, George had watched his old friend wither, like fruit on a vine.

'Find the artefact, George,' Ethan had insisted. 'Send Evie and Jacob for it. The future of London lies in their hands now. The twins; you and Henry – you're the only ones left now.'

'Hush now, Ethan,' George said, and leaned back in his chair to hide the tears that pricked his eyes. 'You will be here to lead us. You're indomitable, Ethan. As unbreakable as one of those infernal trains that trundle through Croydon night and day.'

'I hope so, George, I truly hope so.'

'Besides, the Council has not ratified any operations in this area. They consider us too weak.'

'I know when we're ready better than any Council, and we are ready. Henry will provide. Jacob and Evie will act.'

'Well, then you had better hurry up and get well and inform the Council yourself then, hadn't you?' chided George.

'That I had, George, that I had …'

But Ethan had dissolved into a coughing fit so hard that the muslin cloth he held to his mouth came away speckled with blood.

‘We were so close, George,’ he said another time. He was even weaker now, becoming more frail by the day. ‘The artefact was just a few feet away from me, as far away as you are now. I almost had it.’

‘You did your best.’

‘Then my best was not enough, because the operation did not succeed, George. I ran an unsuccessful operation.’

‘There were circumstances beyond your control.’

‘I failed The Ghost.’

‘He himself made mistakes. Whether he accepts that I have no idea; whether his mistakes contributed to the failure of the operation I couldn’t say either. But the fact remains that it failed. Now we must concentrate on regrouping.’

Ethan turned his head to look at George and it was all George could do to stop himself recoiling afresh. It was true that Ethan’s achievements as an Assassin would never be celebrated along with those of Altaïr, Ezio or Edward Kenway, but for all that he had been a credit to the Brotherhood, and he was a man who even when he was downhearted exuded a thirst for life. With Ethan you always had the sense that inside was a personality at war with itself, pushing and pulling this way and that but never at rest, always questing forward.

Now, though, the skin that once glowed with life was pale and drawn, the eyes that had burned with passion sunken and dull. Ethan was no longer questing for life; he was taking the long walk towards death.

First he had suffered with the flu; then, when that seemed to have passed, came chest pains and a constant hacking cough. When he began hacking up blood the physician was called, who diagnosed pleurisy. Benjamin Franklin had died of pleurisy, said the physician phlegmatically. William Wordsworth too.

Even so, the physician assured the family that pleurisy was an infection of the chest. And so long as the patient rested there was every possibility it would clear up by itself. Plenty of patients recovered from pleurisy.

Just not Benjamin Franklin or William Wordsworth, that was all.

And not the Assassin Ethan Frye, it turned out. For each passing day the pleurisy seemed to write its fate upon his skin more emphatically than the last, and to hear him cough, a crunching rattle disgorged from deep within a chest that was no longer functioning as it should, was dreadful to witness. The sound of it tore through the house. Ethan had taken a room in the eaves – ‘I’m not to be a burden to the twins while I’m ill,’ he had said – but his cough carried down the stairways to the lower rooms, where the twins shared their concern in bitten lips, downcast eyes and shared glances as they took strength from one another.

In many ways the terrible story of their father's illness could be measured in his children's reactions: rolled eyes when he first got ill, as though he was exaggerating his malady in order to enjoy the benefits of being waited on hand and foot, and then a series of increasingly worried silent exchanges when it became terribly apparent that he was not going to recover in a matter of days or even weeks.

After that came a period when the sound of his coughing would make them flinch and their eyes filled with tears; latterly they looked as though they wished for it all to be over, so their father's suffering might be at an end.

He limited their trips to his bedchamber. They would have liked to have been by his bedside night and day, just as he had once sat with his beloved wife Cecily. Perhaps that experience had convinced him the sickbed of a loved one was no place to spend your days.

Sometimes, though, if he was feeling well enough, he would summon them to his room, tell them to wipe the worried looks off their faces (because he wasn't bloody well dead yet), then issue instructions on how they were to lead a new vanguard of resistance against the Templars. He informed them he had written seeking the Council's approval for when it was time to send the twins into action.

Ethan knew his time was short. He knew he was leaving this world. He was like a chess player manoeuvring his pieces ready for a final attack that he himself would not be around to superintend. But he wanted things in place.

Perhaps it was his way of making amends.

It infuriated him that the Council refused to give him their blessing; indeed, the Council withheld any decision on the London situation until such time as they had news of a situation worth acting upon. Stalemate.

One evening, George visited him. As usual they conversed for some time and then, as usual, George was lulled into sleep in the cosy warmth of the eaves. He awoke with a start, as though some sixth sense were prodding him back into consciousness, to find Ethan lying on his side with both hands across his chest, his eyes closed and mouth open, a thin trail of blood running from his mouth to the sweat-soaked sheets.

With the heaviest heart imaginable George went to the body, arranging it on the bed, pulling a sheet to beneath Ethan's chin, and using his handkerchief to wipe the blood from his friend's mouth. 'I'm sorry, Ethan,' he said as he worked. 'I'm sorry for slumbering when I should have been here to help guide you into the next world.'

He had crept quietly downstairs to find the twins in the kitchen. Evie and Jacob had taken to wearing their Assassins' attire, as though to acknowledge that

it was they who would carry the torch from now on, and they had both been wearing them that night, their cowls raised as they sat either side of the bare kitchen table, a candle slowly guttering on the wood between them, in the same wordless dialogue of grief that had enveloped them for weeks.

They held hands, he noticed, and regarded one another from under their cowls, and perhaps they already knew, perhaps they had felt the same energy that had prompted George awake. For they had turned their gaze upon him in the kitchen doorway and in their eyes was the terrible knowledge that their father was dead.

No words were said. George simply sat with them and then, as dawn broke, left for home to attend to the task of notifying the Council that one of the brothers had fallen.

Condolences arrived at the house, but in accordance with Assassin tradition the burial was an unremarkable, quiet occasion, attended by George, Evie and Jacob alone – just three mourners and a priest who consigned Ethan to the grave. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

For some time they seemed to exist in a state of limbo. Until news had reached George that the Metropolitan artefact was close. He had no time to seek the Council's approval for an operation to retrieve it; they probably would have demanded more detailed information anyway. And he knew exactly what Ethan's wishes were. His friend had imparted them to him.

Evie and Jacob were ready. They would go into action.

59

And so in the Croydon rail yard belonging to Ferris Ironworks, a darkened world of smoke-belching locomotives, clanking carriages and complaining brakes, George met the twins for the first time since their father's funeral.

As ever, he was struck by their looks: Jacob had his father's charisma, the same eyes that appeared to dance with a mix of mischief and resolve; Evie, on the other hand, was the mirror image of her mother. If anything even more beautiful. She had a tilted, imperious chin, freckled cheeks, exquisite, questioning eyes and a full mouth that all too rarely split into a wide smile.

Jacob wore a top hat. Evie's cowl lay across her shoulders. Their clothes were free-flowing and customized in the right places: long three-quarter-length belted coats open over discreetly armoured waistcoats and boots with noise-proofed soles and subtle steel toe-caps. On their forearms were the gauntlet-blades with which they were both expert (Evie even more so than Jacob, according to Ethan), their fingers snug in hinged steel protectors that doubled as knuckledusters.

As the air crackled with the threat of the oncoming storm, George had watched them move through the rail yards to where he crouched behind one of the train cars. Thanks to their looks and garb you could hardly hope to see two more striking figures. Yet their father had taught them well. Just as he himself was a master of hiding in plain sight, so too were his offspring.

They greeted one another, sharing something unspoken of Ethan. George had notified them by letter of the job at hand, warning them what it would entail. Before he died, Ethan had told the twins very little about the Piece of Eden that had been the focus of his failed mission in 1862. After all, it was not exactly a glorious episode in the history of the Brotherhood. They knew it was a uniquely powerful object and not to be underestimated. Beyond that was scarcely anything to be said before the job began.

It was to be their blooding.

They hunkered down. Jacob, his top hat perched at its usual rakish angle, was the more brash. His edges were rough, his patience short, and when he talked it

was with the growling voice of the streets. Evie was the more thoughtful and cultured of the two. An outer softness belied a steel within.

‘The iron ships from here,’ said George, indicating the works. ‘The Templar running things is Rupert Ferris, and our target one. Target two is Sir David Brewster, who’s got his hands on the bauble. Think you can handle it?’

The twins were young and keen and fearless, and maybe, thought George, turning to find that they had both climbed to the top of a carriage, they would also be cunning.

‘Ladies and gentlemen,’ he said with a smile, ‘the unstoppable Frye twins. See them nightly at Covent Garden.’

Evie gave him a don’t-worry look. ‘George, honestly, I’ve studied the plans of the laboratory and have every route covered.’

‘And I’ve got all I need right here,’ said Jacob, engaging his blade.

He turned at the sound of a train whistle.

‘Jacob …’ said George.

‘I’ll extend your regards to Ferris,’ he replied. He and Evie were watching the train as it trundled through the siding towards them. They crouched on the roof of their own rail car, ready to spring forth.

‘Evie …’ said George warningly.

‘Chat later, George, we’ve a train to catch,’ said Evie and then the two of them made their leap, landing with all the grace and stealth of predatory wildcats on the roof of the passing train. A wave to George and the mission had begun.

‘May the creed guide you, you vagrants,’ George called to them, but didn’t think they’d heard. Instead he watched them go with a strange mixture of emotions: envy for their youth, grace and balance. And concern that Ethan was wrong – that the twins were not yet battle-ready. Not for an operation of this magnitude.

But most of all, hope – hope the two incredible young Assassins could turn the tide in their favour.

60

‘Poor man, more afraid than ever. The years have not been kind,’ said Evie to Jacob, shouting above the roar of the locomotive.

‘Evie Frye,’ chided Jacob, ‘where do you get it from?’

‘Same place as you, Jacob,’ she said, and they exchanged a glance, that preternatural meeting of eyes in which they both remembered and honoured their mother and father. The knowledge that all they had now was each other.

‘Have fun,’ said Jacob. They were nearing the ironworks on tracks that threaded through dark industrial buildings and chimney stacks pouring out choking smoke, and Jacob rolled his top hat from his head, collapsed it and secreted it within his robes in one well-practised move as he raised his hood. Evie pulled her own cowl over her head. They were ready.

‘Don’t die,’ she told her brother, and then watched, heart in mouth despite herself, as he crouched, hands either side of him on the train roof, fingers splayed. As the train pulled level with the ironworks and the forbidding dark brickwork rushed towards them as the carriage leaned and the train tilted on the rails, Jacob leapt – another perfectly executed jump that took him to a sill on the first floor of the ironworks. A second later and he’d be inside.

She watched him recede. The next time she heard anything of him it would be via the thump of an explosion as he escaped the ironworks spattered with the blood of Rupert Ferris. For the time being, however, she went to one knee, gloved hands on the roof of the carriage, wind whipping her cowl as the train cut its way through the outskirts of Croydon and on to the shipping yard further along the line. Here, according to the plans sent to them by George, was the laboratory where the artefact was stored; where, providing the information was correct, Sir David Brewster was working on it. What did she know about it? There was information gleaned from ancient scrolls, of course, but scrolls tended to be a little ambiguous. However, her father had actually seen it in action. He had talked of how it would glow, seeming to feed off some inner energy of the user, transferring something dark and primal into an actual destructive energy.

‘Take that look off your face, Evie,’ he had added a little crossly. ‘This is not an object to admire or covert. It is to be treated with the utmost caution, as a

weapon of war that cannot be allowed to remain in the hands of the enemy.'

'Yes, Father,' she said obediently. But if she was honest with herself the object's attraction outweighed its possible danger. Yes, it was something to be feared, to be treated with respect. But even so.

The shipping yard to which the train was heading began to loom ever larger on the immediate horizon, so she turned and crabbed along the train roof until she came to a hatch. Fingers prised it open and moments later Evie dropped into the carriage below. She pulled back her cowl, blew hair away from her face and took stock of her surroundings.

She was among crates, all of them marked STARRICK INDUSTRIES.

Crawford Starrick. The mere utterance of his name had sent her father into a painful reverie. He was the Templar Grand Master, the man she and Jacob had pledged to topple. No matter what George said. No matter what the Council were to approve or not, the twins had decided their father's legacy was best observed by removing Crawford Starrick from his position; recovering the artefact, taking out his lieutenants, disrupting his business practices – all these were steps on a path that led to the death and dishonour of Crawford Starrick.

Just then, the door to the carriage opened, and Evie took cover. A man entered: just a shape in the darkness, framed unsteadily in the open door. A burly man, she thought, and the impression was confirmed when there came the flare of tinder and he lifted a lamp to see in the gloom.

'Where is it?' he said over his shoulder, addressing some unseen comrades. 'Where's Brewster's supplies?'

Now there was a name she recognized. Brewster. She crouched in the shadows, waiting. This man would be her first. Her first live kill, and she flexed her wrist, feeling the reassuring weight of the gauntlet mechanism along her forearm, its individual sections moving easily and silently. She reminded herself that she was trained for this. At the same time she recalled what her father had always told her – that no amount of training could prepare you for taking a man's life. 'Taking from him everything he ever was and everything he ever will be, to leave his family grieving, to begin a wave of sadness and sorrow and possible revenge and recrimination that might ripple throughout the ages.'

Her father knew that there was ready and then there was *ready*.

And Evie was ready, but was she really *ready*?

She had to be. She had no choice.

The man was cursing his mate for a coward. Behind a crate Evie used two hands to raise her cowl, letting the fabric settle over her head, taking strength and comfort from the symbolism of it, and then activated her blade.

Ready now, she gave a low whistle.

‘Who’s there?’ said the visitor, raising his lantern a little and moving into the carriage two more steps. He drew level with Evie’s position and she held her breath, awaiting her moment. Her eyes went from her blade to the spot just behind the guard’s ear where it would penetrate, slicing up into the skull cavity, into the brain. Instant painless death …

But death all the same. She was on the balls of her feet now, the heels of her boots raised off the boards of the carriage, one hand steadying herself on the floor and her blade hand brought to bear. He was her enemy, she reminded herself. A man who stood alongside those who planned to persecute and tyrannize any who did not share their aims.

And possibly he did not deserve to die. But die he would, in service to a cause that was greater than them both.

And with that thought uppermost she struck from her hiding place behind the crate and her blade found its mark and her victim made a tiny almost imperceptible noise, a final croak, and then she was helping him to collapse silently to the dirty floor of the carriage.

She held him as he died, this stranger. *You were my first*, she thought, and silently honoured him, closing his eyes.

‘It’s never personal,’ was what Father had said. But then he’d stopped himself. ‘It’s *rarely* personal.’

She laid the man down and left him there. It wasn’t personal.

Now, she thought, as the train pulled into the laboratory facility, *what I need is a diversion*. If only she could uncouple the carriages …

Outside the carriage stood the first strongarm’s mate. He had been dozing and she took him out easily. Father had always said it became easier and he was right; she barely gave her next target a second thought. She didn’t bother closing his eyes and wishing him well; she left him where he fell and moved on up towards the locomotive. In the next carriage she pressed herself into hiding to avoid a pair of gossiping guards.

‘How’s Sir David and Miss Thorne getting on?’ one of them was saying.

‘She’s turned up like a bad penny, ain’t she?’ replied his mate. ‘I’ll put five bob on things not being to her liking.’

‘Ain’t lookin’ too good for old Sir David then.’

Lucy Thorne. Evie had heard the name of course. Was she with Brewster then?

She let the guards pass then moved quickly through the final carriage and to the coupling between the locomotive and the carriage. She didn’t have long now; they would discover the bodies of the men she had killed, and she was glad of her gloves as she planted her feet apart and reached for the ring of the coupling

pin. As the wind rushed and the train tracks passed beneath her feet, she gave a grunt of effort and wrenched it free.

Smartly she stepped on to the locomotive, watching the carriages pull away. From around her came shouts as the men of the yard wondered why the carriages had become detached and came running to investigate. Meanwhile, she clambered to the roof of the locomotive, trying to take stock of her surroundings as the train ground to a halt in the yard with a screech of brakes and complaining metal. To one side of her, the water of the Thames inlet glittered darkly, to the other was the tumult of the shipyard, with its cranes and railways sidings and row upon row of office buildings and …

Something very interesting indeed.

Flattening herself into almost invisibility, the first thing she saw were two figures she recognized: Sir David Brewster and Lucy Thorne. The two of them had been surveying the sudden chaos around them before turning to continue their progress towards a carriage and coachman stationed close to the entrance gate.

Evie jumped from the locomotive, pleased her diversion had been so diverting, not to mention glad of the smoke that hung like a permanent funeral shroud over the site. *Industrialization has its benefits*, she thought, as she followed the pair, staying in the shadows of the perimeter, getting a good look at her quarry.

Lucy Thorne wore black. A black hat, long black gloves and a black crinoline and bustle gown buttoned high on the throat. She was young, with attractive looks offset by a scowl that matched her dark ensemble, and as she walked, disturbing layers of smoke that hung like a ship's hammocks in the dimly lit yard, it was with the quality of a shadow. As though she were darkness repelling light.

Scuttling beside her, Sir David Brewster was maybe three times her age, with a fretful face and long side whiskers. Older than Lucy Thorne, he nevertheless seemed cowed, subsumed by the darkness of her. This was a man who was recognized as the inventor of the kaleidoscope and something Evie knew only as the 'lenticular stereoscope', whatever one of those was. A nervous man, or nervous now at least, overawed by the presence of Lucy Thorne, he struggled to keep up with her, and speaking in a whining Scottish accent he said, 'I need two more weeks with the device.'

Angry, Lucy Thorne retorted, 'Your questionable practices are beginning to draw unwanted attention. You have been given more than enough time to achieve results, Sir David.'

'I was unaware that you expected me to perform like a cocker spaniel.'

‘Permit me to remind you of your obligations to the Order.’

Brewster made an exasperated noise. ‘Miss Thorne, you ride me like a racehorse.’

As they reached the carriage, the coachman doffed a three-cornered hat, bowed low and opened the door for Lucy Thorne, who acknowledged him with an imperious nod as she took her seat and arranged her skirts, before leaning from the open door to address Brewster a final time. ‘Sir David, I will return tomorrow. If you have not unlocked the device’s secret, forget your dogs and your horses. I will leave you to the wolves. Good day.’

And with that the Templar cultist indicated to the coachman, who closed the door, tipped Brewster an impertinent wink and resumed his place on the board to drive the horses and remove Lucy Thorne from the chaos of the shipyard.

As it drove off, Evie watched Brewster let out a flabbergasted noise before his attention was drawn to a group of men nearby. Evie’s gaze went there too, and what she saw was several guards escorting a flamboyantly attired man across the yard, the man in custody protesting loudly. ‘I was merely promised a tour of the premises, m’lords.’

‘Who sent you?’ demanded one of the Templar men.

Another chimed in. ‘He’s one of Green’s spies.’

But Brewster was already calling over to them. ‘Get that man to interrogation. Then I want him brought to the lab.’

Evie watched him still. Then her gaze went to the sky overhead. By now the canopy was black with gathering clouds, and the air had a crackle and tension about it that made a storm more of a certainty than ever. She could see that Brewster thought so too; he had spun on his heel and moved over to something she hadn’t spotted before. A metal pole fixed into the dirt of the yard. Some kind of lightning conductor, perhaps? With another look up to the gathering clouds, Brewster broke into a sprightly run and disappeared into a door of the building, leaving the uproar of the facility behind him. The first drops of rain were beginning to fall; the men were still attempting to re-couple locomotives and carriages, while simultaneously conducting an inquest into how the two had become detached.

Evie, the agent of chaos, merely smiled as she slipped through the door behind Brewster, and just as she did so came the first crack of thunder and the sky was lit in a flash of blinding white light.

Once inside, she clung to the wall, staying wide of the lamps’ illumination and engaging her blade at the same time. Her eyes moved as she had always been taught: section by section around any given space, identifying hostiles,

pinpointing areas of vulnerability, thinking like the fully fledged Assassin she was.

However, what greeted her wasn’t quite what she expected.

61

She had anticipated a laboratory. According to George Westhouse's plans – the selfsame plans that she had pored over at home in Crawley – where she stood now, *at this very point* – should have been the laboratory.

But it wasn't. Instead she was in a roundhouse, some kind of antechamber, and there was no sign of laboratory equipment. There were no hostiles. There were no points of vulnerability.

There was nothing at all.

No, what was that? There came a shout from a door opposite and, with a quick glance back to the yard outside, where rain was falling hard now and the men still shouted and cursed one another, Evie closed the door to the outside and crossed the floor to the second door, this one ajar.

There she stood, controlling her breathing as she peered cautiously through it. The scene that greeted her was just what Brewster had ordered: an interrogation. The Templar men had bound their dandily dressed captor to a chair and the questioning had begun.

Perhaps the man had expected to be brought before a gentleman of high social standing, who would apologize profusely for the rough treatment he had received at the hands of the guards and offer him brandy and cigars in the back office prior to a round of punitive sackings. No such luck. He'd been tossed in a chair and trussed up for burly security to fire questions at him.

'I ask you, m'lord,' he was saying, 'can't a gentleman wander the tracks?'

'How did you break into the laboratory? The entrance is hidden,' growled one of the men. He had his back to Evie but she could see he was pulling on a pair of black leather gloves. The prisoner's eyes went from the gloves to the face of his inquisitor, but if he was looking for signs of mercy or compassion then he was looking in the wrong place.

'What do you wish me to elaborate upon, m'lord?'

There was a wheedling tone to his voice now, an unmistakable note of foreboding.

'Who sent you?' demanded the inquisitor. He flexed his fingers in the gloves. Evie heard another unseen man chortle with anticipation of the great show to

come.

‘Why, I did, m’lord. I came on my own two feet.’

Now the second thug moved into view, the two of them crowding the man from Evie’s view. ‘Let me put his fingers through the mangle –’

‘Not yet.’ The first man stopped his mate. ‘Not yet.’ He turned his attention back to the prisoner. ‘Was it Green?’

‘Neither green, nor black nor brown,’ said the man in the chair.

‘Henry Green,’ said a man Evie couldn’t see.

‘Ah, Henry Green … who’s he?’

Threatening now, the unseen man said, ‘Your very soul hangs in the balance … Confess or my sharp friend here will have his way. You shall return empty-handed.’

Evie heard the distinctive sound of a knife being drawn from its sheath.

And, of course, she couldn’t allow it to be used. She flexed the fingers of her gauntlet, engaged her blade and then moved into the room to confront the men.

There were three of them. This mission was turning into quite a test of her skills. This time? Multiple opponents.

She weighed up, she assessed and then struck, dancing in towards a grinning thug on the right but at the last second unexpectedly ducking and swiping her blade up and across the chest of a man in the middle. She rolled and came up with the blade foremost, jamming it through the breastplate of a Templar goon on the right. The remaining inquisitor, the slowest, had barely drawn his sword when Evie drew back her knee and delivered a high kick with the reinforced edge of her boot.

Damn, she thought, watching as her opponent staggered back. The coat had impeded the height of her strike, and instead of finishing him off she’d merely unbalanced him. At the same time he’d recovered enough presence of mind to draw his weapon and even as she steadied herself to meet his attack he was coming forward, demonstrating a little more guile and cunning then she had originally given him credit for.

Stupid. Stupid amateur. Evie turned her head in time to avoid the steel making contact with her face. She checked back quickly and at the same time tapped her left hand on the forearm of her right to retract the blade. Next she turned into his outstretched arm, a movement that was half dance step, half embrace but wholly deadly as she ended it with a jab to the face from her gauntlet and then engaged her blade into his eye socket.

Blood, brain and eye-fluid sluiced down his slackening cheek as he slumped to the floor. She shook blood from the blade and sheathed it, and then turned to

the man in the chair, who was giving her a bemused but otherwise good-humoured look.

‘Ah, thank you kindly,’ he said. ‘I was in ever such a squeaky fix, when – what do you know? – you rescue me.’

‘Where’s the hidden laboratory?’ she asked him. The men she’d just fought were taking their time to die. Gurgles, death rattles and the sound of boots scrabbling at the brick in a final feeble burst of life were the background to their conversation.

‘Untie me, and then we can parlay, my lady,’ bargained the trussed-up prisoner.

Evie climbed astride the man and pulled her fist back. His face twisted into a mixture of fear and indecision. He had seen the blade in action. He had seen Evie in action. He had no desire to be on the receiving end of either. This was a man who had been lulled into a false sense of security by a pretty face many times before and wasn’t about to let it happen again.

‘I’m pressed for time,’ she said, just in case her intentions weren’t already clear. ‘Tell me now.’

‘It’s underground,’ he swallowed, inclining his chin towards what looked like a panel of some kind in the wall of the roundhouse. ‘It requires a key. One of the guards nicked mine, cheeky sod.’

‘Thank you,’ she said, and stood, about to leave.

‘Now untie me.’

She shook her head. ‘You got yourself in. I trust you can get yourself out.’

He was still calling out after her as she left. ‘Not to worry, my lady, I can still recall a couple of tricks from my carnival days.’

Good luck to you then, she thought, as she departed by a different door, now looking for another guard who might have the key.

Thank God for the flapping mouths of Templar guards. She pressed herself into the shadows of a passageway, overhearing two of them discussing the very key she sought.

‘What are you doing? Keep that key in your pocket, or else Miss Thorne will have your guts for garters.’

‘Let’s have a butcher’s downstairs then. I want to see that artefact.’

So do I, thought Evie Frye, as she claimed another victim and recovered the key.

She returned to the roundhouse, deciding to release the prisoner if and when the key worked on the panel, but too late – he was absent, chair overturned and ropes discarded on the floor. She tensed in case he was planning to leap out at

her but, no, he was gone. Instead she turned her attention to the panels and was at last able to let herself into the building's inner sanctum.

Inside, the walls were dark and wet. They muffled the sound of the storm and yet somehow, here, it felt as though the elements were at their fiercest.

How could that be? She remembered the lightning rod and thought of power being directed down here. Power needed for an underground laboratory, perhaps?

And then she came upon it. And she knew she was right – that she stood at the very epicentre of the storm's channelled energy.

And that the artefact was close.

62

The flagstones stretched away from where she stood at the door, opening out to a large vaulted underground space where scientific apparatus on tables lay between Tesla coils and upright lightning conductors – all throbbing with a steadily intensifying energy.

Too much? In the roof of the laboratory hung a series of harnesses and platforms. Lightning particles seemed to crack all around them, sparking and flashing, painting the room a sudden glare of phosphorescent white.

At the other end of the laboratory was what looked like a large inspection tube and in there, she could see, was the artefact. Standing nearby was Sir David Brewster with an assistant, both poring over what lay on the other side of the toughened glass, the orb-like golden Apple. Even from so far away, Evie found herself transfixed by it. Years and years of research into the Pieces of Eden and now here before her was a real one.

Evie stood close by the doorway, but even though she was lit by the sudden lightning flashes, the men were too absorbed in their work to see her. She crept forward, still hypnotized by the sight of the Apple but able to eavesdrop on Brewster and his assistant now.

‘By Jove, under blue light it goes completely transparent!’ exclaimed the scientist.

Brewster was nothing like the man he had been before: weak and small within the dark shadow of Lucy Thorne. Now he was a man in his own domain, in command once again, and feeling confident enough to throw a few jibes Thorne’s way. ‘The cheek of that woman,’ he shouted over the buzzing of the lightning conductors, the hissing of the Tesla coils, the rhythmic huffing of automated bellows. ‘I say, I ought to seize the blasted artefact for Edinburgh.’

‘If you don’t mind me saying, that would be an exceptionally bad idea,’ retorted his companion.

‘Why? It’s God’s apple, not hers. I’d display it in public. Darwin would be vanquished. Banished in shame to the blasted Galapagos to roost with his beloved finches.’

‘Miss Thorne would have your head, and Mr Starrick the rest,’ said his colleague.

‘You know, Reynolds, it might just be worth the risk!’ exclaimed Brewster.

‘Sir David, you cannot be serious.’

‘Just a wee joke, Reynolds. Once we unlock the artefact’s secret the Templars’ grip on London will be fixed. The Assassins will fall, and Darwin will be little more than a bearded memory.’

As she drew closer, coming out into the open now where the two men could easily see her, she could see the Apple glowing. Brighter now. Lit by an increasingly heavy shower of sparks.

It was time to make it hers.

She engaged her blade and struck, and saw the assistant slide off her blood-streaked steel before Brewster was even alerted to her presence. His eyes went to his dead companion and then back to Evie Frye, looking at her agog, his brain trying to make sense of this sudden unexplained appearance.

And then, Evie leapt and killed him.

‘It is time to lay down your head, Sir David Brewster,’ she said, letting him to the floor.

‘But I have so much more to discover.’

His eyelids flickered. His breathing ragged now.

‘Do not be afraid,’ she told him.

‘I am not. God will protect me.’

‘I will continue your experiments,’ she said, and saw it clearly, the path that lay before her. She would carry on with the learning that had begun in her father’s library at Crawley. She would make it her mission to locate the artefacts, to harness their power and use them for the benefit of mankind. A wind of good fortune, not ill.

‘You cannot stop Starrick,’ said Brewster, his head on her knees as she knelt with him. ‘Miss Thorne has already found another Piece of Eden, more powerful than the last.’

‘I will take that one too,’ said Evie, never more sure of anything in her whole life.

‘We fight to gain what we cannot take with us,’ said Brewster. ‘It is in our nature.’

And then he died. Evie took out her handkerchief and, in a ritual passed down by her father – one he said was a homage to Altaïr’s own feather ceremony – touched it to Brewster’s wound, soaking it with his blood. She folded the handkerchief and secreted it inside her jacket.

In the same moment everything seemed to happen at once: guards, three of them, came rushing into the laboratory.

Evie stood, already engaging her blade and ready for battle, just as there came a sudden increase in electrical intensity, and the artefact seemed to bulge with a fresh influx of power – and then exploded.

Evie was immediately below the inspection glass and protected by the plinth on which it stood. The guards, however, were not so lucky. They were peppered with flying fragments and seemed to disappear in a fog of blood-mist and debris as beams, harnesses and platforms came tumbling down upon them from above. Evie scrambled to her feet and ran for the door, just as the chain reaction began, lightning conductors bursting into flame, machinery exploding with a flat *whump*.

And then she was outside, grateful to be joining those who were sprinting away from the factory as a series of explosions tore it apart.

63

‘What was that explosion?’

She had met Jacob back at the rail yard as arranged. He too looked as though he had seen plenty of action in the meantime. Both were blooded now.

‘The Piece of Eden detonated and took the lab with it,’ explained Evie, finishing her tale.

Jacob curled a lip. ‘That magic lump of hyperbolic metal? I’m shocked.’

She rolled her eyes. All those nights reading to him. Imparting that knowledge to him. They really, truly had been for absolutely nothing.

‘Simply because you have never valued the Pieces does not –’

An old argument was about to resurface until the appearance of George Westhouse. ‘All went according to plan?’ said the elder Assassin sardonically.

‘There was a slight … complication,’ replied Evie, shamefaced.

‘The lab exploded,’ said Jacob with an eyebrow arched at his twin sister. *You want somebody to blame; there she is.*

‘You derailed a train,’ George Westhouse reminded him.

‘Oh he did, did he?’ said Evie.

Jacob shrugged. ‘Well, the train derailed and I happened to be on it. I killed my target.’

So, Rupert Ferris, of Ferris Ironworks, an organization that as well as being in Templar hands employed child labour, was dead.

‘Brewster is also no more,’ said Evie.

‘Then, all in all, a successful mission, in spite of you two,’ said George.

‘What about London?’ said Jacob. Evie glanced at her brother. For her the events of the evening had been an epiphany, a signpost for the way forward. Was the same true of Jacob?

‘What about it?’ asked George cautiously.

‘We are wasting time out here,’ said Jacob, indicating the rail yard around them and the suburbs. The city of London was close – yet so far out of reach.

‘You know as well as I do that London has been the domain of the Templars for the last hundred years. They are far too strong yet. Patience.’

Ethan thought differently, remembered George, seeing his friend's belief alive and well and living on with the twins.

'But the Templars have found a new Piece of Eden,' said Evie.

George shrugged. 'Sir David is dead; they do not know how to use it. The Council shall guide us; sound advice that your father would have seconded. I shall see you back in Crawley.'

The twins watched George leave with sinking and somewhat resentful hearts. Fires that burned bright had been comprehensively doused by George and his invocation of the Council. What they both knew, of course, was that their father would certainly not have agreed with the remote Assassin elders. And what they both also knew was that they had no intention of abiding by either George Westhouse or the blamed Council.

A train clattered slowly past and blew its whistle.

'What's stopping us?' said Jacob, nodding at it. 'London is waiting to be liberated. Forget Crawley.'

'Father would have wanted us to listen …'

'Oh, *Father*. You could continue his legacy in London.'

'Freeing future generations from a city ruled by Templars. You know, Jacob Frye, you might just be right.'

'Then, shall we?'

'Yes, let's.'

With that, the two of them ran and boarded the train bound for London.

There, they would meet Henry Green, 'the Assassin watching over London.'

They knew nothing of his true history.

64

After what had happened at the Metropolitan line, The Ghost had stayed in the Thames Tunnel for over a year.

There he had continued to provide a reassuring presence for the other tunnel dwellers, though in truth he did little but act as a figurehead. Most of the year was spent sitting or lying in his alcove, grieving for Maggie and for the other innocent lives lost in the failure of the operation to retrieve the Piece of Eden. He cursed the age-old hunt for trinkets, scorning Assassins and Templars and their obsessions with baubles.

Ethan had come to him in the tunnel, but The Ghost had dismissed his old mentor. He had no desire to see Ethan Frye.

George came too, and explained that the Brotherhood needed a man in the city. ‘Another undercover operation if you like, Jayadeep. Something more suited to your talents.’

The Ghost had chuckled at that. Hadn’t Ethan Frye said the very same thing to him all those years ago in Amritsar? *Something more suited for his talents.* Look how that had turned out.

‘You would be required simply to establish an identity as a cover, full stop,’ George had said. ‘There’s no infiltration involved. Quite the reverse. We want your cover to be just tight enough to avoid detection but not so tight that you can’t begin to assemble a network of spies and informants. You are to be a receptacle, Jayadeep, a gatherer of information, nothing more. You have a way about you.’ George had indicated along the tunnel. ‘People trust you. People believe in you.’

The Ghost raised his head from where his arms were crossed over his knees. ‘I am not a leader, Mr Westhouse.’

George hunkered down, grimacing as his old bones complained but wanting to sit with Jayadeep, an unknowing echo of a time when, in The Darkness, Ethan had done the same thing.

‘You won’t be a leader, not in the traditional sense,’ said George. ‘You will be required to inspire people, just as we know you can already do. The Brotherhood needs you, Jayadeep. We needed you before and we need you now.’

‘I failed the Brotherhood before.’

George gave a short impatient snort. ‘Oh, do stop wallowing, man. You’re no more to blame than Ethan, or myself, or a Council that seems intent on allowing the enemy to rise unchecked. Please, do me this one favour. Will you at least think about it?’

The Ghost had shaken his head. ‘I am needed here in the tunnel more than in any war.’

‘This tunnel will shortly cease to exist,’ George told him. ‘Not like this, anyway. It’s been bought by the East London Railway Company. Look around you, there’s nobody here. There are no more pedestrians, no more traders to serve them, and none but the most desperate come here to sleep. There’s just you and a few drunks sleeping it off until they can go home to their wives and tell lies about being robbed of their wages. They did need you once, you’re right. But they don’t need you any more. You want to offer your services to your fellow man, then devote yourself to the creed.’

The Ghost had deferred. He had continued to brood until, as the months wore on, he was visited again.

And it was strange, because The Ghost had spent so many nights in this very tunnel dreaming of them and dreaming of home that when his mother and father appeared to him he assumed that this too was a dream, that he was having an awake-dream, hallucinating the image of Arbaaz and Pyara standing there before him.

It had been a matter of five years or so, and they were just as luminous as he remembered, and around them the dingy darkness of the tunnel seemed to fall away, as if they created their own light, standing in front of him clad in the silken garments of the Indian Brotherhood, the chain that ran from the phul at his mother’s nose to her ear glimmering in the soft orange light of a lantern. No wonder he thought he was dreaming at first. Their appearance was ethereal and other-worldly. A memory made flesh.

The Ghost sensed other figures hanging back in the darkness and could make out George and Ethan. No then – not a dream – and he scrambled to his feet, hands reaching out to the wet tunnel wall to steady himself, the dizziness of suddenly standing, the weakness he felt, having languished so long, the emotion of seeing his mother and father again, making him wobble unsteadily, knees buckling, and his father stepped forward to support him. Ethan too, and then the four Assassins led Jayadeep out of the tunnel. Out of the darkness.

65

His mother and father had taken temporary apartments in Berkeley Square. There, The Ghost slept in a bed for the first time in as long as he could remember; he ate well and he received his mother's kisses, each one like a blessing.

Meanwhile, between The Ghost and his father hung poisoned air. Was Arbaaz one of those who had arrested Jayadeep and flung him into The Darkness? What had Arbaaz done – or not done – about the death sentence pronounced on his son?

The questions were never asked. No answers offered. Doubt and suspicion remained. So naturally The Ghost gravitated towards his mother, who became a conduit between the elder Assassins and the recalcitrant younger one. It was she who told him he would not be returning to Amritsar. Not now. Maybe not ever. His appearance there would pose too many questions, and anyway the needs of the Brotherhood were best served if he remained in London.

The Ghost had sensed the hand of Ethan Frye and George Westhouse behind these decisions, but he knew his mother agreed that the Mir's very presence in London was a risk and taking Jayadeep home an unconscionable magnification of it.

He considered leaving of course. But he was still an Assassin, and you can't turn your back on a belief. The Ghost had seen the artefact's terrifying potential and knew it should be retrieved. Having previously failed did nothing to change that.

One day, during that honey-coated period at Berkeley Square, his mother had invited The Ghost for a walk, just her and him. They trod streets thronging with Londoners who goggled at his mother as though she were not merely from another country but belonged to a different species altogether. Her robes were silk but otherwise unadorned and in stark contrast to the crinolines, whalebone corsetry, unwieldy hats and fussy parasols of the indigenous population. And for all that none could touch his mother for her beauty. He had never been more proud of her than he was at that moment.

‘You are aware, I think, of the course of action that Mr Westhouse and Mr Frye favour?’ she said as they walked. Her arms hung loosely at her sides, shoulders thrust back, chin proud, meeting every stare with the same dignity.

‘They want me to be something I’m not, Mother.’

‘They want you to be something you most definitely *are*,’ she insisted. ‘A credit to the Brotherhood.’

He forgot his pride for a moment, head hanging in remembrance. ‘No, I was not that, and fear I never will be.’

‘Ah, hush,’ she chided him. ‘What a load of rubbish. Did we raise you to welcome defeat with open arms? Do I look into your eyes and see nothing but surrender? I fear you will exhaust my patience if you’re to continue being quite so self-pitying.’

‘Self-pitying? Really? You think me self-pitying?’

She inclined her head with a smile. ‘Maybe a little, sweetheart, yes. Just a touch.’

He thought about that. Then said tartly, ‘I see.’

They continued their promenade, heading a little off the beaten track now, towards the less salubrious areas of town.

‘I’ve hurt your feelings,’ she said.

‘Nobody likes to think of themselves as a sulky child,’ he admitted.

‘You are never that, and making this journey to see you, I’ve found my child has grown into a man.’

He gave a derisive snort. ‘Some man. Incapable of completing his blooding.’

‘There you go again …’

‘Sorry, Mother.’

They had made their way through winding side streets into Whitechapel, until they found themselves in front of a shop, where his mother stopped, turned and reached to take her son’s face in her hands. ‘You’re so much taller than me now.’

‘Yes, Mother.’

‘You see? You’re a man now. A man ready to shed the childish conceits of self-admonishment, guilt, shame, whatever other poisonous emotions crowding that head of yours, and take up the next phase of your destiny.’

‘Is it what you wish?’

She dropped her hands and half turned away with a laugh. ‘Ah, now you’re asking, Jayadeep. Dear, sweet Jayadeep, grown inside of me, brought into the world and nursed by me. What mother dreams of her son growing up a killer?’

‘An Assassin, Mother. A great Assassin, not a great killer.’

‘You can be a great Assassin without being a great killer, Jayadeep. It’s what I hope for you now. It’s why we are here. For now you have reconciled yourself to

your new life; I welcome you to it.'

She was indicating the shop in front of which they stood. His eyes went to it, a grimy window crowded with dusty knick-knacks, bric-a-brac and gewgaws.

'A curio shop?' he said to her.

'Just the right thing for an enquiring mind such as yours,' she told him.

'I'm to be a shopkeeper,' he said flatly.

'Let's go inside, shall we?'

She produced a key from within her robes and moments later they stepped into the crowded but somehow comforting surroundings of the shop. Inside it seemed to stretch back a long way into spectral and mysterious depths, and when they closed the door they were cut off from the sounds of the street outside. Dust danced in shafts of light that leaked through dirty windows obscured by piled-high trinkets. Shelves heaved and bulged with a variety of goods that were little more than indistinct twilight shapes. He liked it at once.

But even so – a shop.

'I believe it was Napoleon who said that England was a nation of shopkeepers,' smiled his mother. She could see he was intrigued, and that he liked the premises too much to simply dismiss them out of hand. 'How fitting, then, to become a shopkeeper.'

They made their way along a narrow passageway between shelves that groaned with every conceivable ornament. Here was one crammed with dusty books, another that seemed in danger of simply collapsing beneath the weight of the china piled on to it. He saw pressed flowers under glass and found he was still able to name them, thanks to memories of his mother in Amritsar. She saw him looking, and they shared a glance, and he wondered how carefully these items had been chosen and placed. After all, his mother had evidently been here before. As they passed along a narrow passageway she indicated more things she thought might be of interest to him: a tray of clockwork components that excited him on sight, taking him back to more barely remembered hours as a child, when he had pored over broken clocks and clockwork toys. Not far away a bureau groaned beneath the weight of a multitude of crystal balls, as though the shop had been visited by a gang of hard-up fortune tellers, and he recalled having been fascinated by them as a child.

She led him to the back of the shop where she drew across a thick floor-to-ceiling curtain, ushering him into a workroom beyond, picking up a herbarium that she handed to him. 'Here. It's something of a British pastime.'

He opened it, finding it empty.

'For you to fill,' she said.

'I remember gathering flowers with you, Mother, at home.'

‘They all have symbolic meanings, you know.’

‘So you often told me.’

She chuckled and then, as he laid down the book, indicated their surroundings. ‘What do you think?’ she asked him.

He looked at her, thinking his heart might break with love. ‘I like it,’ he told her.

On a table in the workroom were folded-up clothes and a scroll that she picked up and handed to him.

‘These are the deeds. It belongs to you now.’

‘Henry Green,’ he read from the scroll as he unfurled it. ‘That is to be my new name now?’

‘You always liked the name Henry and, after all, you’re wearing a green hat,’ said Pyara. ‘And besides, it’s an English shopkeeper’s name for an English shopkeeper. Welcome to your new life, Henry. From here is where you can oversee the Assassin fightback in the city and control your information matrix. Who knows? Perhaps you might be able to sell the odd curio while you’re here too. Now …’ She reached for the small pile of clothes. ‘An outfit of which you can at last be proud.’

To preserve his modesty she turned round as he changed and then swung back to admire him. He stood there, resplendent in flowing silky robes edged with gold, a leather chest strap, soft slippers.

‘No more bare feet, Jayadeep, or should I say, Henry,’ his mother said. ‘And now, one last thing to complete the picture …’

She reached to a box that also lay on the table. Henry had seen its like before, knew exactly what it contained, and he reached for it with a mixture of gratitude and trepidation. Sure enough, it was his old blade. He strapped it to his wrist, enjoying the feel of it there again, after all this time.

He was no longer The Ghost now. He was Henry Green.

66

And so to the twins.

‘Two Assassins,’ said Henry, on a rooftop overlooking the city, ‘equal in height. One female, one male. Two decades old, and those devilish smiles. You must be the Frye twins.’

He assessed them immediately: yes, the smiles were very ‘Ethan’. Otherwise, they seemed to incorporate differing qualities. Jacob: arrogant, impatient, a little rough around the edges; for Henry it was ambivalence at first sight. Evie, on the other hand …

‘And you are …?’ she said.

His robes flapped in the breeze as he gave a short bow. ‘Henry Green at your service, miss.’ He paused. ‘I was sorry to learn of your father’s passing.’

‘Thank you,’ she said, and her eyes dipped in sorrow before finding him again and holding him in a gaze in which he swam in for a moment or so, reluctant to come to the surface.

‘What can you tell us about Crawford Starrick?’ said Jacob at last, and it was with some reluctance that Henry turned his attention to the other twin, slightly irritated at having the spell broken and assessing Evie’s brother afresh.

‘I suppose the Council desires news,’ he said, remembering himself.

‘London must be freed. To provide a better future for all its citizens.’ The conviction lit Evie’s face as she spoke. It danced in her eyes and made her even more beautiful, if that were possible.

‘Thank goodness the Council saw reason and sent you to aid us.’

‘Yes, thank goodness,’ said Jacob in a tone of voice Henry recognized. Young customers who thought him a clueless Indian shopkeeper.

He went on anyway. ‘I’m afraid I do not have pleasant news. Today, Starrick sits at the helm of the most sophisticated Templar infrastructure ever built in the Western world. His reach extends all across London. Every class, every borough, the industries, the gangs …’

Jacob preened. ‘I’ve always thought I would make a marvellous gang leader. Firm but fair. Strict dress code. Uniting a mix of disenfranchised outsiders under one name. Evie, that’s it. We can rally them to our side.’

Evie shot him a well-practised look of reproach. ‘Oh? The way you rallied those card players at the Oakbrook Tavern into the river?’

‘That’s different. They beat me at whist.’ He stared off into the distance. ‘I can see it now. We’ll call ourselves the Rooks.’

‘You were never good at chess, either,’ she said, casting a sideways look at Henry, apologizing for her brother.

‘You have a better plan?’ Jacob was saying.

Her eyes were on Henry, a kindred spirit. ‘Find the Piece of Eden.’

Jacob made a disgusted sound.

‘Well.’ Henry cleared his throat. ‘Now you’ve quite finished …’

67

Later, Henry took them to his shop. In the years since his mother had unveiled it, nothing had changed. Business in curios wasn't exactly booming but that didn't matter; selling knick-knacks wasn't his primary objective and his other business of assembling research into the artefacts and monitoring Templar activities through a growing coterie of informants was flourishing. George Westhouse had been right, Henry used the same innate talents that had endeared him to the tunnel dwellers to court the poor and dispossessed of Whitechapel. He had cultivated them almost unknowingly: a little protection, one or two moneylenders taught a lesson, a pimp shown the error of his ways, a violent father who needed reminding of his responsibilities. He had managed it using threat and insinuation. His combat skills falling into disuse suited him fine; he never was a warrior. His gang was unlike others that roamed the East End – like Jacob wished his 'Rooks' would be – that were built on hierarchical principles of power and violence. His ran along far more benign principles. Their leader had earned their respect, and also their love.

'Over the years I have established a number of connections across the city,' was all he said now.

'Splendid!' replied Evie. 'We'll need focused aid –'

'Focused aid?' scoffed Jacob. 'No, what we need to do is take over Starrick's gangs to cripple his control.'

'You're not aiming high enough,' said Evie exasperatedly. 'Starrick has influence in every branch of society. We need to match him.'

'I see what you're saying, Evie. We need the Rooks.'

She shook her head, repeating an oft-stated maxim. 'You're not starting a gang called the Rooks. We need to locate the Piece of Eden.'

'No. We need to reclaim London from Starrick. Just tell me my targets …'

'No.'

'What?'

'It's not time for that yet.'

'I didn't come here to hunt down curios.'

‘“First understand the dance, only then become the dancer”,’ she said, quoting something said to them many times over the years.

‘Oh? So you’re taking over where Father left off?’

‘Someone has to.’

68

‘Well, Freddie, it’s nice to see you.’

Abberline sat in the front room of Mr and Mrs Aubrey Shaw’s Stepney rooms and remembered a time when he was given the warmest of welcomes by Mrs Shaw and her two children, when he had fervently wished he had better news to impart.

Now was the same. Except this time …

‘Would you like a cup of tea, Freddie?’

Without waiting for an answer, Mrs Shaw departed, leaving the two men together.

‘Well,’ repeated Aubrey, ‘it’s good to see you, Freddie. Sergeant Frederick Abberline, as I live and breathe. Fresh-faced Freddie finally came of age, eh? I always knew you’d do it, mate. Of all of us you were always the dead cert to do well in the force.’

Aubrey now ran a butcher shop in Stepney Green. Abberline had swiftly discovered it was good to have a butcher friend. Especially when it came to cultivating contacts, because it was true: Abberline had done well in the force. A man named Ethan Frye had introduced him to another man, Henry Green, whom Abberline had recognized as the Indian lad from the dig. About that, he was sworn to secrecy but only too happy to maintain the confidence. After all, Ethan Frye had saved his life. He and Henry had gone up against Cavanagh and co. As far as Abberline was concerned, that put them firmly on his team.

And it was funny, because Abberline had never got to the bottom of what happened at the Metropolitan dig. The ‘powerful object’, that Ethan had told him about, well, Abberline had imagined some kind of weapon, something that set off an explosion. To what end, he had no idea. But Cavanagh had died, his three lieutenants were dead too, and as for the other one, the clerk? Well, he had turned out to be working for a third party, and that was when it had got complicated; when it came down to what Ethan described as age-old enemies: men who move among us plotting to wrest control of man’s destiny.

And that was plenty for Abberline. That had been enough to convince him to stop asking questions, because somehow a fervently held belief of his own – that

there are forces beyond our control manipulating us from on high – had dovetailed with one of Aubrey's fervently held beliefs: that sometimes there are no answers.

So Frederick Abberline had accepted that there were things he couldn't change, but pledged to fight for the things he could change, and gave thanks for being able to tell the difference between the two. Meanwhile, Henry Green, it emerged, had built up a community of loyal informants in Whitechapel. Abberline joined his gang, sometimes the beneficiary of information, sometimes able to pass information on.

In other words the situation was what you'd call *mutually beneficial*. And for the first time since the mess at the Metropolitan, the newly minted Sergeant Abberline had thought he was making progress. Doing a bit of good in this world.

Why, he'd even met a woman, Martha, fallen in love and got married … And there, unfortunately, his run of good fortune had come to an end.

'Freddie, is something wrong?' Aubrey was saying. The smile on his lips had died at the sight of his friend's forlorn features. 'This is just a social visit, is it? You've not got anything to tell me? You and Martha? You haven't had a fall-out, have you?'

Freddie wrung his hands between his knees. He had become adept at disguise. His penetration of Whitechapel sometimes depended on his ability to move in the streets unrecognized, unnoticed, unremarked. There were occasions when it had proved invaluable to Henry's gang. He wished for a disguise now, so that he wouldn't feel so very exposed.

'No, Aubs, and I can't tell you how much I wish that we had just fallen out, because then my dear Martha would be alive right now.'

'Oh, Freddie,' said Mrs Shaw from the door. She hurried in, placed the tray of tea things on the table then came over to Abberline where she knelt and took his hand. 'We are so very sorry, aren't we, Aubrey?'

Aubrey had stood, painfully. 'Oh my, and the two of you only married a matter of months.'

Abberline cleared his throat. 'She was claimed by tuberculosis.'

'That's a great shame, Freddie. Me and Aubrey always thought you went perfect together.'

'We did, Mrs Shaw, we did.'

For some time they sat, and then, not quite knowing what else to do, Mrs Shaw served the tea and then the three of them sat in silence for a little longer, the two Shaws helping Frederick Abberline to grieve.

'What now, Freddie?' said Aubrey.

Abberline placed his cup and saucer on the tabletop. Only the tea leaves knew what the future held in store for him.

‘Time will tell, Aubrey,’ he said. ‘Time will tell.’

69

Weeks passed. The twins made their mark in London. Despite Evie's protestations, Jacob had set up his gang, the Rooks, and established them as a force in the city. Meanwhile, they had liberated the urchins, Jacob had assassinated the gang leader Rexford Kaylock, the twins had found a train hideout and they had secured the trust of Frederick Abberline, who had promised to turn a blind eye to their activities.

And while Jacob's attention was focused on building the reputation of his gang, Evie had thrown herself into investigating the Piece of Eden.

'Ah, another exciting night home for Evie Frye,' he had said, spying her with letters, maps and assorted other documents. Perhaps he hadn't spotted the fact that she was also strapping on her gauntlet at the time.

'Just on my way out, actually,' she said, with more than a hint of pride in her voice. 'I found the Piece of Eden.'

As usual, it was lost on Jacob, who rolled his eyes. 'What's this one going to do? Heal the sick? Deflect bullets? Control the populace?'

'They are dangerous objects, Jacob. Especially in Templar hands.'

'You sound exactly like Father.'

'If only.'

Now she drew her brother's attention to an image of Lucy Thorne that lay on the table. More and more often lately Evie had found her gaze going to it, remembering the intimidating woman she had seen in the shipping yard. 'Lucy Thorne is expecting a shipment tonight. She is Starrick's expert in the occult. I am nearly certain she is receiving the Piece of Eden Sir David Brewster mentioned.'

Jacob sniffed action. 'Sounds like fun. Mind if I join you?'

'Promise you will stick to the mission?'

'I swear.'

A short while later they were at the docks, where they flattened themselves to the roof of a warehouse overlooking the main docking area in order to watch boxes being unloaded below them.

There she is, thought Evie excitedly. Lucy Thorne. The occultist was dressed in her customary black. Evie wondered if she mourned the loss of Brewster's Piece of Eden.

Lucy Thorne's words drifted up to them as she took one of the men to task. 'The contents of that box are worth more than your life and those of your entire family,' she snapped, one bony finger pointing at a specific crate. 'Do you understand?'

The man understood. He doubled the guard then turned back to Lucy Thorne. 'Now, Miss Thorne, there's the matter of some papers for Mr Starrick. If you'd just come this way …'

Reluctantly she followed him. From their vantage point, Evie and Jacob assessed the situation.

'Whatever it is she's after, it's in that chest,' said Evie. They cast their eyes around the docks, noting Templar gunmen on the rooftops. Meanwhile, the crate that was suddenly as precious to them as it evidently was to Lucy Thorne had been loaded with others on to a flatbed horse-drawn wagon. A guard stood holding the reins. Two other guards close by were muttering darkly about their terrifying boss, as well as speculating what might be in the priceless crate.

Jacob slipped off his top hat and raised his cowl, his own little ritual before action, and then, with a wink at Evie, he left to deal with the guards on the rooftops.

She watched him go before making a move herself, scuttling silently to the edge of the roof then dropping down to crouch by a large water container beneath a dripping downpipe. With one eye on the men guarding the cart, she kept watch on Jacob's activities above. There he was, moving up on an unsuspecting sentry. His blade rose and fell. The man fell silently, a perfect assassination, and Evie hissed a quiet congratulation through her teeth.

It died on her lips. The second gunman had seen his comrade fall and had brought his rifle up to his shoulder.

As Jacob dashed across the rooftop towards the gunman, her brother moving faster than the guard could take aim and squeeze the trigger, Evie herself scooted out from behind the water barrel. She came up behind the two men who stood at the rear, both of whom had their backs to her. Pivoting, she unleashed a kick at the neck of the first man.

Clever Evie. She had remembered to undo her coat this time, and the luckless sentry was smashed forward into the cart, nose and mouth crunching a second before he left a bloody streak on the crates as he slid to the dirt.

Evie had already swung to her left, bringing her gauntlet hand round and punching the second guard in the side of the head. This man had approximately

half a second to live and he spent it feeling dazed and off balance, before Evie pulled her elbow back, engaged her blade and thrust it into his temple. By now the third sentry had made his escape, and the gunman on the rooftop lay dead. But it was too late. The alarm had been raised, and just as she pulled herself up to the wagon and used her blade to lever the nailed lid of the crate open Jacob had jumped from the roof of the warehouse opposite and come sprinting across the apron towards the wagon.

'I think it's best we leave,' he said, and never was a truer word spoken. The docks were in uproar. Doors of warehouses flew open to decant men in bowler hats, snarling dogs in tweed suits, all of them bearing guns or steel. Ever since Evie and Jacob's activities in the city had attracted the attention of the Templars, they'd hired the most mercenary, ruthless and bloodthirsty underlings they could lay their hands on.

Men came piling out of the meeting room, with Lucy Thorne screaming directions at them. She had picked up her skirts and with a great and righteous anger came barrelling out of her meeting, only to find her precious cargo was on the move. There were twin spots of emotion at her cheeks and her voice was a screech. 'Get after them! Get after them!'

Evie had a brief impression of that face. A lingering glimpse of fury to match. And the chase was on.

With Jacob at the reins their carriage flew out of the dockyard and into the waste area that was its hinterland. On the top of the wagon Evie hung on tight. Her cowl billowed with the onrushing wind as the horses gained speed. She wanted to scream at Jacob to go more slowly, but out of the dockyards emerged a second carriage, a porcupine of Templar men.

On the board was Lucy Thorne, resembling a raven with crinoline wings. Though she hadn't quite lost her black composure, it had certainly been rattled knowing she had let the precious crate out of her grasp, and she was pointing and screaming, her exact words lost in the wind but her meaning very clear indeed: get the twins.

Now the carriages came bursting out of the docks and careered left on to Ratcliffe Highway. Tall buildings, shops and flat-fronted tenements lined either side of the street, windows looking impassively down on a highway packed with wagons and dock traffic below. Ratcliffe Highway, a street notorious for its violence, was now witnessing more of it.

The rattle of the two wagons over the cobbles was almost deafening. Evie was terrified the wheels would come loose. Meanwhile she was desperately trying to make sense of what she saw in the crate – a cache of documentation and a book inscribed with the Assassin crest – as well as trying to cling on. A shot rang out

and she heard a bullet whistle past her cheek, eyes reflexively going to Jacob to check he was all right.

And, yes, he was all right. His cowl flapped in the wind, his arms spread wide as he handled the reins, intermittently yelling insults over his shoulder at their pursuers and urging the horses on.

Ahead of them pedestrians scattered, traders flung themselves on their barrows to stop produce taking flight, coachmen steadied their horses and shook their fists angrily, and still the carts thundered on.

Another shot. Evie flinched but saw it take a lump out of brickwork nearby, even as they raced past. Now what came to her over the crash of cartwheels, the screaming of terrified pedestrians and spooked horses was the increasingly panicked urgings of Lucy Thorne. Her head whipped round and once again the two women locked stares. Lucy Thorne seemed to simmer with hatred for the young Assassin. Whatever was in this packing box was important to her, important to the Templars – and therefore important to Evie.

If she could keep hold of it.

And it was a big if. Jacob was driving as fast as he could but their pursuers were gaining, the Templars pulling level now. Evie saw the men hanging on, pulling pistols – and then remembered that thanks to Henry Green she now had one of her own.

With one hand steadying herself on the crate, she pulled the Colt from within her jacket, drew a bead on the man nearest who was aiming his own weapon, and fired.

Evie was not as good with a gun as she was with a blade, but was a good shot nevertheless, and her bullet would have made a new hole in the man's forehead were it not for the fact that his cart suddenly lurched as the wheels hit a pothole. As it was, he clapped his hand to his shoulder and screamed, dropping his own pistol, only just stopping himself from being flung out of the wagon and on to the cobbles below.

Meanwhile, the Templars' wagon had gone dangerously off course, the driver desperately trying to keep it from tipping over. Even Lucy Thorne had stopped her screaming and was hanging on to the boards for dear life, her hat a thing of the past, her hair tossed about by the wind.

The other cart tried to ram them. More shots rang out. Next Evie saw Templar thugs preparing to jump from one wagon to the next, Lucy Thorne's orders becoming increasingly more threatening as she pictured the two Assassins escaping with her documents.

'Look.' Jacob was pointing, and sure enough, there in the distance, rattling along the Blackwall railway line, was the train that the Assassins had made into

their hideout.

Seeing it had given Jacob an idea. They could make a sharp right into Rosemary Lane and then, as long as they timed it right, they would be in the perfect position to leap from the cart on to the train. It would mean having to leave the chest behind, but the twins, with their preternatural link, seemed to decide on that course of action together without actually saying as much.

They reached the junction of Ratcliffe Highway and Rosemary Lane, and Jacob wrenched the horses to the right, already beginning to get to his feet, trying to control them at the same time as he prepared to make the jump.

They were level with the train now. Evie had no choice but to make the jump. With a cry of frustration she grabbed the notebook adorned with the Assassin crest – it was all she could take with her – thrust it into her coat and then, as her brother leapt from the wagon and into an open cargo door of the train, she did the same.

The two of them landed heavily on the boards: Jacob exuberant, flushed with excitement; Evie the opposite. All she had to show for the evening was one dog-eared notebook. And for her that wasn’t good enough.

70

Evie and Jacob continued to put their stamp on London, manoeuvring the Assassins into what must have been the Brotherhood's strongest position for a century. They even gave medicine to the sick of Whitechapel – like Henry they were winning hearts and minds.

And, of course, the Templars were not happy. Their Grand Master Crawford Starrick was given updates of Assassin activity, receiving them from his position at the mahogany desk of his office.

'Jacob Frye intends to endanger all of London at the hands of the mob,' his lieutenant James Brudenell told him.

'Or perhaps he doesn't intend much of anything at all,' chimed in Philip Twopenny, as Starrick added a cube of sugar to his tea. 'Perhaps he is simply content to dice with our lives.'

Starrick lifted his teacup to breathe in its scent. His handlebar moustache quivered.

'Gentlemen,' he said, 'this tea was brought to me from India by ship, then up from the harbour to a factory, where it was packaged and ferried by carriage to my door, and packed in the larder and brought upstairs to me. All by men and women who work for me, who are indebted to me, Crawford Starrick, for their jobs, their time, the very lives they lead. They will work in my factories and so too shall their children. And you come to me with talk of this Jacob Frye? This insignificant blemish who calls himself an Assassin? You disrespect the very city that worked day and night so that we may drink this. This miracle. This tea.'

Lucy Thorne had entered the room. She took a place by her master's side. The terrifying vision atop the wagon no longer, her hat was on her head, her composure repaired.

'I am nearing the end of my research,' she said. 'Our beloved London shall not suffer such a bothersome fool for much longer.'

'And what of this sister I hear of? Miss Frye?' asked Starrick.

Lucy Thorne pursed her lips. 'Miss Frye shall be gutted soon enough.'

71

Oblivious to the forces who plotted against them, Evie and Henry's research continued at his shop and in their hideout. 'You may not have found a Piece of Eden,' he told her, trying to console her, 'but this material is invaluable.'

She looked at him gratefully and the pair held each other's gaze until Evie gave an awkward little cough and looked away. Together they went back to looking at the notebook rescued from the crate, until Henry hit on something. 'Look. It says that the London Assassins had found a shroud.'

A shroud.

Evie came close to read over Henry's shoulder. Closer than she needed to. Both knew it. Both maintained contact, tiny little shocks running through them.

'The Shroud of Eden is supposed to heal even the gravest injury,' Evie read. 'If the Assassins had found something like that, surely Father would have known.'

No, he was obsessed with the Metropolitan artefact, thought Henry. The apple of his eye was the Apple. 'There must be something we're missing,' he said.

As if on cue Evie saw how documents inserted into the notebook came together as a map. Having studied it, she snatched it up, going to leave.

'Aren't you coming?' she said Henry.

He looked awkward. 'Fieldwork is not my speciality.'

'We found a clue to a precursor object – don't you want to follow it?'

He did of course. He wanted to stay with Evie too. 'Put that way one can hardly refuse.'

The two of them followed the map, excited by the new discovery and thrilled to be in each other's company, as it took them to one of the more well-to-do areas of the city, where the streets were less crowded and the houses more grand. Something occurred to Henry. Could they be heading in the direction of Queen Square?

'Do you know, I think this map may be taking us to the Kenway mansion,' he said.

'Kenway? The pirate?'

‘Master Assassin and pirate, yes.’

‘It’s surprising that you haven’t already searched the house. Kenway was an Assassin, after all.’

‘Edward’s son Haytham joined the Templars. They own the house now.’

‘So the Templars own a house with Assassin treasures stored in it – and have never located them?’

Henry gave a short smile. ‘We must be better at hiding things than they are.’

They came into the square, which even Henry knew had changed over the years. Once named Queen Anne’s Square, it had been lined with mansions on all sides, the Kenways’ among them, and though the statue remained in place, and the alehouse on the corner, the Queen’s Larder, had stayed open for business since time immemorial, the mansions had since been occupied by hospitals and other charitable institutions, as well as booksellers and printers.

There were fewer buildings used as domiciles now, but the Kenways’ mansion was among them. This was where Edward Kenway had lived on his return to these shores. His son, Haytham, had been inducted into the Templars, a long and ghastly story that had seen father pitted against son.

Jennifer Scott, Edward’s daughter and Haytham’s half-sister, had spent years living there, cursing Assassin and Templar equally, though continuing to enjoy the benefits of her links to both, not least of them being the grand home on what had since been renamed Queen Square.

There Jennifer had remained, occasionally venturing forth to propose that Assassins and Templars should seek some accord, until her death of old age when the London Templars – and probably the Assassins as well – breathed a sigh of relief.

Evie and Henry came on to the square now, passing the Roman Catholic Aged Poor Society and the Society of St Vincent de Paul, before Evie suddenly ground to a halt, dragging Henry towards the scant shelter of iron railings lining the square.

‘Look,’ she said, breathing the word into his ear.

Sure enough, a carriage stood outside the Kenway mansion. Emerging from it was the unmistakable personage of Lucy Thorne.

‘I’ll be in the study,’ they heard her say to a male companion. ‘I don’t want to be interrupted, unless you have news of the lost notebook.’

And in the next second the two Templars were inside, and Evie and Henry were exchanging a look of concern. Getting in would be a challenge. Staying clear of Lucy Thorne would be another one.

But they had come too far now.

72

Above them were open windows. No problem for an Assassin. The two of them scaled the wall quickly then dropped into what turned out to be a music room, complete with a vast grand piano and overlooked by a portrait of Edward Kenway standing with the young Haytham. Other paintings gave a clue to the mansion's seafaring history.

Henry brought his mouth close to Evie's cowl and she reached a finger to hook it back.

'What are we looking for?' he whispered.

Her eyes roved around the space. 'I'm not quite sure.' The pair of them set about conducting a search, finding that there were musical notes hidden around the room.

'What are the Templars not seeing?' said Henry almost to himself.

'Something only we can.'

'Edward Kenway was a pirate. Where would a pirate hide his treasure?'

'I'd hide mine in a library,' said Evie, and Henry chuckled.

'Mine would *be* the library,' he said and the pair of them shared another look. Kindred spirits.

'The piano is beautiful.'

'Do you play?'

'No. I wish I could. I love the sound. You?'

'A little. Enough to pass as a genteel young lady if I need to.'

'I would love to hear you play if the opportunity presents itself,' he said, and noticed a blush come to her cheeks.

He went to the piano now. 'Some of these keys are more raised than others,' he said, and studied them, trying to find some rhyme or reason to the almost imperceptible way that certain keys sat more proudly than others.

He tried one – *tink* – which made Evie start, and she looked over, about to rebuke him for the noise, when suddenly the piano began playing itself. They forgot to panic about the sound carrying, when, at the same time, a section of the floor opened to reveal steps that led down into some unseen basement.

This, then, was the Kenway vault.

‘Not enormously subtle, is it?’ said Henry.

Evie rolled her eyes. ‘Clearly Kenway had a strong sense of spectacle.’

They went down and found themselves in the Kenway vault, their breath held as they began to make sense of a lifetime’s worth of paraphernalia that was stored here.

‘This is incredible. I think this is the *Jackdaw*,’ said Henry, his eyes alighting on a model of Edward Kenway’s legendary pirate brig. ‘To think this has been hidden for a century.’

But Evie had moved to a high table in the centre of the vault, where her eyes had gone to a document and an engraved disc. She scanned the parchment. ‘The history of the London Assassins … Boltholes … Vaults … A hidden key.’ Excited now she added, ‘This is it.’

Henry moved across and again they enjoyed the sudden proximity, before the moment was broken by the sound of Lucy Thorne from the music room above them. ‘You say you heard music,’ they heard her snap at unseen guards. And then: ‘There was no opening there before.’

Evie and Henry looked at one another. *Uh-oh*. Henry found a latch that he closed, exciting general dismay from those above.

‘Help me block it,’ called Lucy Thorne, sensing that this newly opened door was crucial to their continued progress.

Down below, the door shut and Evie and Henry were left wondering what to do now.

A way out. There had to be one. Together they scoured the walls with a fingertip search until, with a small cry of triumph, Henry found it: a wall panel that opened to reveal stone steps spiralling down and beyond the reach of any lantern. Next they were making their way along a passageway beneath the great house, grateful to escape the clutches of Lucy Thorne but tinged with disappointment.

‘An entire vault filled with Assassin history, left behind once again,’ bemoaned Evie.

‘We’ll just have to find an even better cache or reclaim this one later,’ Henry said.

She scoffed. ‘*We*? I thought you preferred to stay out of fieldwork.’

‘I … I was thinking more of you and your brother. I shall provide planning assistance. From the train.’

‘Jacob’s off marauding,’ she said. ‘There is a vacancy, should you decide to broaden your horizons.’

‘I’ll think on it,’ he said.

‘You do that,’ she said with a gently mocking smile. ‘Now let’s get above ground.’

73

‘So, the hints you found in the Kenway house lead here …’

Jacob waved a somewhat disparaging hand at the huge column rising from the ground below them. They stood on a hillside overlooking it, yet were still dwarfed by it. The Great Fire Monument. Built near the spot in Pudding Lane where the eponymous Fire of London had started on 2 September 1666, and a suitably awe-inspiring tribute to that epochal event.

For some moments the twins simply gazed at it, eyes going from the sculpted plinth at the booth, up the fluted column and to the top, where a cage had been constructed to prevent suicides. As the tallest tower in the world, it dwarfed surrounding buildings and on a clear day it was possible to see it from right across the city. At close quarters it took their breath away.

Evie wished Henry were here. Then chided herself for the disloyal thought. After all, Jacob was her brother, her twin brother with whom she shared an almost supernatural communication. Things she’d save from a fire? Number one, her blade; number two, her brother. And on a good day, if Jacob were being especially pleasant company, well, she might even rescue her brother first.

Today, however, was not one of those days. Jacob was not pleasant company. Instead he was choosing to mock and lampoon her at every available opportunity, specifically, it seemed, the growing affection between herself and Henry Green.

Henry, of course, wasn’t here to defend himself. He was at the shop, reviewing the material, so Jacob was taking advantage of his absence.

‘Oh yes, Mr Green,’ Jacob said, parroting his sister, ‘that’s a fascinating idea. Oh please, Mr Green, come and take a look at this book and stand oh-so-close to me, Mr Green.’

She fumed. ‘I do not …’ And then composed herself. ‘Well, perhaps you have nothing better to do, but *I* am busy protecting the Assassins.’

‘Are you really? What was it Father used to say …?’

‘“Don’t allow personal feelings to compromise the mission”?’ Evie rolled her eyes.

‘Precisely,’ replied her brother. ‘Anyway, I’m off. If I find any more wild geese for you to chase, I’ll be in touch.’

To show his scorn he lowered his cowl, retrieved his hat from inside his clothes, popped it out and then rolled it along his arm to the top of his head.

And with that he left.

She watched Jacob go, pleased to see the back of him almost as much as she mourned the tension between them, and then made her way to the monument. On its base was a small and familiar-looking recess. Sure enough the disc she’d liberated from the Kenway mansion fitted perfectly. In response the stone seemed to crack, just enough to open, and she took a set of spiral steps up the inside of the monument. These were not the usual steps – not those taken by sightseers and suicides and James Boswell, who had apparently suffered a panic attack halfway up, before gathering himself, completing the journey and then declaring the view an abomination. No, these steps were purely for he or she who was in possession of the disc.

Sure enough, when she reached the summit, two hundred feet high, two things greeted her. Firstly, the view – and she stood buffeted by wind as she gasped at a panorama that bristled with chimneys and spires, a skyline of industry and worship. Secondly, she found another disc, this one larger, and with a slot. She compared the two discs in her hand and then, on a whim, decided to try to fit the first one into the aperture of the second.

It fitted. Perfectly. Still pummelled by the wind, she looked at it in blank amazement as a picture formed. If where she currently stood was London’s best-known landmark, then this was pointing her to the second best-known, another Sir Christopher Wren building: St Paul’s Cathedral.

A short time later she had made her way there, wishing she’d stopped to collect either Jacob or, preferably, Henry on the way, but knowing they could be anywhere. She ascended to the roof of the grand cathedral. No problem for a woman of her skills.

There, at the statue of St Paul, she inserted the two disc pieces into a slot in the stone. Next – did she sense it or genuinely feel it? – a door deep below her opened, and shortly afterwards she had gone down and was walking into a vault in the chapel.

It was a large room dominated by a table in the centre. On one wall was an Assassin symbol. Ah, so it was a dedicated Assassin vault. Across the room was a stained-glass window, while in an alcove hung what Evie at first took for a beautiful item of jewellery. She moved closer, examining a chain that was decorated with links and small intricate spheres, about the size of pearls but inscribed with odd angular hieroglyphics, as well as a pendant that she lifted in

her palm. Again there was something infinitely precious about it, as though it had been fashioned by a silversmith who was not of this earth or of this era. A thrill ran through her. The knowledge that in all likelihood she was holding something of the First Civilization.

A key of some kind. Inscribed on it was Latin, meaning ‘the remedy is worse than the disease’, and she picked it up, turning it over in her hands. It was nothing she recognized from any of her readings. Nothing she could make sense of there and then. Perhaps when she had the literature in front of her …

She hung it round her neck – just as the door opened to admit Lucy Thorne.

‘Good day, Miss Frye. I’ll take that,’ said the Templar. All in black, her features baked into a predatory stare, she crossed the chamber towards Evie. She came alone, supremely confident of her dominion.

Evie let the key fall to her chest. She raised her cowl then let her hands drop to her sides, loose but ready. ‘You want the Shroud to cement your own power,’ she said, ‘but what if you cannot control it?’

Lucy pursed her lips. ‘And why do *you* want the Shroud? Merely to keep the Templars from having it? How like an Assassin – to hold the power of eternal life and yet be too afraid to use it.’

Lucy had stopped a few feet away from Evie, just out of striking range. The two women sized each other up. Evie saw no obvious weapons, but then who could say what was concealed in the voluminous folds of her opponent’s funereal garb. ‘Eternal life,’ she said, every muscle alert, ‘is that what you think the Shroud offers?’

‘What I think is no longer your concern,’ said Lucy, whose eyes gave away her intentions a second before she made her move, and in one eye-wateringly fast motion she had snatched a blade from her boot and sprang, full-length, knife hand extended, in an action that almost took Evie by surprise.

Almost being the operative word. The young Assassin skipped back, triggered her blade at the same time and was pleased to see the expression on her opponent’s face instantly transform. If Lucy Thorne saw easy pickings she had made a dire mistake, for a Templar and a boot knife were no match for Evie Frye. A spirited attack it might have been, but it was predicated on surprise, and without that Lucy had nothing save a desire to win and an instinct for survival. And neither were enough to best Evie.

Their blades clashed. The ringing sound ricocheted around the stone walls. With bared teeth Lucy tried again but Evie fended her off easily, taking the measure of her opponent, biding her time, ready for the death blow.

But Lucy Thorne wasn’t done. As Evie approached, her hand shot out. What bloomed from the centre of her fist was a globe and for a strange, mad moment,

Evie thought that Lucy Thorne was attacking her with a Piece of Eden, until it registered: a smoke bomb.

Blinded and temporarily disorientated, Evie staggered back, bringing her blade into a defensive position and restoring her balance, ready to meet a follow-up attack. Sure enough, it came. Lucy Thorne was an inferior combatant but she lacked for nothing when it came to commitment and she was brave. *My God*, thought Evie, *is she brave*. Through the smoke of the bomb, Lucy flew forward with her boot dagger slashing more in hope than confidence and thanks to the fog and ferocity of her attack very nearly succeeded.

Nearly being the operative word.

Smoke billowed as Evie turned smartly to one side, thrusting out her chest as she swept back her shoulders and brought her blade low, knocking Lucy Thorne's knife aside. In the next moment she swung about, bringing her right shoulder forward in a most unladylike but very Evie Frye-like roundhouse punch that made hard and sickening contact with Lucy Thorne's jaw, sending the Templar's eyeballs spinning and her teeth rattling as she staggered back. Evie sheathed her blade then stepped forward and swung the gauntlet hand.

The move had been neat. It had won her the fight. But maybe Evie had a little too much of her father and brother in her. Perhaps she was overconfident. For the punch was too much and instead of flooring Lucy Thorne it sent her flailing back, blade skittering off to one side, arms wildly pinwheeling, towards a plate-glass window behind her.

Evie saw what was going to happen and realized her mistake. But it was too late. She sprang forward and in her haste lost her footing. Her grasping fingers failed to find Lucy Thorne, and for a split second the two women scrabbled at one another trying to prevent the inevitable.

They could not. The glass shattered around Lucy Thorne and she seemed about to fall to her certain death when one desperate hand found the key round Evie's neck. Suddenly it was all that prevented her from falling and Evie was trapped too, crying out in pain as the chain dug into her flesh.

'Coming with me?' sneered Lucy Thorne, and once again Evie had to hand it to her opponent. She didn't lack for valour.

But …

'I have other plans,' said Evie, and out came her blade and she sliced the chain, dismissing Lucy Thorne.

With a scream the Templar fell, still holding the key, and Evie was dumped back inside the room. She pulled herself up, coughing and panting as she dragged herself to check the broken window and the stone below.

Lucy Thorne was gone.

‘Dammit,’ said Evie.

74

Evie sat and brooded. True, she had been pleased to hear of Jacob's progress. He had dispensed with the bank owner Twopenny, putting a crimp in the Templar's financial pipeline, for one thing. Other smaller sorties had proved similarly effective.

Her own work had met with less success.

On the one hand, she had the opportunity to spend more time with Henry Green, and even Jacob's taunts could not take the edge off that particular pleasure. She and Henry were growing closer all the time.

But on the other, their investigations had yielded little of merit. The more they buried themselves in books and the more they pored over the material that Evie had taken from the crate, the less, it seemed, they learnt.

She mulled over Lucy's words. How the Shroud offered eternal life. They already knew the Shroud of Eden was, quote, 'supposed to heal even the gravest injury', but eternal life?

And now Lucy Thorne had Evie's key.

'What good is a key if you don't know what lock it opens?' she said one afternoon, as she and Henry wasted another fruitless afternoon in the company of candlelight and mystifying literature.

'I daresay Miss Thorne is in the same predicament,' Henry said dryly, not even bothering to lift his head from the journal he was reading.

It was a good point. One that Evie acknowledged with a sigh and a heavy heart, her eyes going back to her own work. And then – just as she did so – she saw it. There in front of her was …

'Henry,' she said quickly. She put her hand to his arm, then just as quickly dropped it once more, clearing her throat of the sudden embarrassment of contact. 'Here. This is it.'

Henry saw an image of the key beneath her finger. *So that was it.* Galvanized, he reached to a pile for another book, mind instantly making connections.

'This matches the collection owned by the queen,' said Henry, flicking through the pages. He found what he was searching for and looked at her, eyes shining with excitement. 'It's kept in the Tower of London.'

75

Hours later, with the city cowering beneath a curtain of darkness and fog, Evie Frye crouched in the crenulation of a wall overlooking the inner ward of the Tower of London. To her left were the darkened windows of Lanthorn Tower, which had been gutted by fire in the great blaze of 1774 and was still in need of repair. For that reason it remained an uninhabited, badly lit and mostly unguarded corner of the Tower grounds. Perfect for Evie to take stock.

Squatting there, she was able to see over into the central complex where the White Tower stood – 'the keep', presiding over the smaller structures surrounding it. Dotted around were the familiar figures of the Yeoman Warders, the beefeaters who guarded the Tower day and night. Among them would be a man that Henry counted as an ally. Finding this man was her next task.

As she crouched, watching, she stretched out her muscles. Four hours she had been waiting, and it had given her ample opportunity to study the movements of the Warders. What struck her was a sense of two distinct groups. Something was afoot, she thought. And she believed she knew what it was.

And then her attention was arrested by the arrival of Lucy Thorne.

Evie clung even more tightly to the shadows as her nemesis stepped from a carriage and crossed the courtyard to the lower steps of the great keep. The Templar woman's gaze swept around the walls surrounding the inner ward and Evie found herself holding her breath as it passed her hiding place. Then Lucy Thorne ascended the steps and stepped inside the keep.

Evie decided to bide her time some more. Below, the Ceremony of the Keys was taking place, but she was watching something else. Away from the ceremony two guards were dragging a constable away. The man was protesting in no uncertain terms, but his curses fell on deaf ears.

Except, not quite on deaf ears. Down below was another Yeoman Warder. Evie saw him looking on fretfully as the constable was frogmarched towards the Waterloo Barracks at the western end of the complex.

The look in his eyes. That was him. That was her man.

Spurred into action, she climbed down from her perch and into the ward close to where he stood, still a picture of indecision. From the shadows she attracted

his attention with a low whistle, identified herself as a friend of Henry and watched a look of grateful trust overtake his features. ‘Thank heavens you’ve come,’ he said, and went on to tell his tale.

What emerged was a picture of the Templars extending their tendrils into the Tower hierarchy itself. Many of the beefeaters were Templar imposters. Many were still loyal to the Crown, but gossip and suspicion reigned and the balance of power was being tipped.

‘That Thorne woman has gone into St John’s Chapel.’ He jerked a thumb towards the keep, where the apse of the chapel was visible. ‘I could help get you in.’

She nodded. *Do your worst.*

‘All right, for this to work, you’ll have to pretend to be my prisoner.’

And with that, he took hold of her arm and marched her across the apron of the ward towards Waterloo Barracks, manoeuvring her over the threshold and then into the main entrance hall.

Straightaway she could see the extent of the Templar infiltration. They mocked her with it as she was led through the barracks.

‘Nice to see an Assassin in chains for once,’ called guards.

Taunting her.

‘The Templars own London, Assassin. Don’t forget it.’

The ally led her into a passageway for the cell block, closing the door on the men in the outer barracks.

Here there were two sentries standing guard at a door in the far end. Like the others, the sentries were goading her. But now Evie Fry made them eat their words. Pretending to slip free of her captor, she sprang forward in a fencing stance and triggered her blade in the same instant, thrusting it through the tunic of a startled guard. The second man never stood a chance. Still low, Evie punched forward with the blade, jabbing him quickly in the thigh then taking advantage of him doubling over in pain to thrust upwards into the space between his collarbone and neck. He gurgled and slumped to the stone. Dead.

Her ally had watched, given her the thumbs up and with the quiet assurance that he would organize the fightback slipped away. In moments she would hear the sound of battle from outside.

In the meantime the short battle had been fought to the accompaniment of anguished cries from the other side of the locked cell door. The constable had been making his presence known for some time now, and sensing action a short distance away, called, ‘Is someone out there?’ Voice muffled by the thick wooden door.

She came to it, put fingertips to the wood, lips close to it. ‘Yes, a friend.’

‘Oh, that’s good. Say, friend, could you get me out?’

Evie was a good lock-pick. Her father had made sure of that, and she made short work of the door, finding herself in the grateful presence of a red-faced, excitable constable.

‘Thank you,’ he told her. ‘It’s treason, is what it is. And desecration of the chapel. Miss Thorne told me to be grateful they didn’t kill me outright. The nerve.’

‘She’s after an object of great power,’ Evie told him. ‘She can’t be allowed to steal it.’

The constable’s face fell. ‘Not the Crown Jewels?’

Evie shook her head. ‘Something much more important.’

Henry’s friend had seen to it that the barracks had been made safe. Blood-soaked bodies were testament to that. The western section was theirs. Outside, the constable spoke to his men. ‘All right, gentlemen,’ he told them, ‘we are facing an enemy we never expected – traitors in our midst,’ before outlining a plan of action and series of signals for when the men should strike back at the Templar stooges.

The men dispersed and then, at a signal from Evie, launched their attack. In the ribbons of the inner and outer ward and in the courtyard outside the keep, the constable’s men descended quickly upon the Templar guards. There were minor skirmishes but Evie could see the battle would be short and easily won. She was not even required to activate her blade as she made her way to the entrance of the White Tower.

There, she ran quickly and nimbly up the steps, then knocked on the door, praying those inside were still unaware of the rebellion taking place in the wards.

She tensed, waiting, ready to dispatch whoever was unfortunate enough to answer. However, no answer came. Steeling herself, she tried the great handle of the door and found that it turned. Next, she slipped inside.

Damn.

Straightaway she felt the point of a pike at her neck and realized she’d walked into a trap. At the same time, the razor-sharp edge of a Wilkinson sword was placed to her forearm, just above the gauntlet, prohibiting any movement. She felt a warm droplet of blood make its way into the collar of her jacket, but the pain was nothing compared to her chagrin at being so easily caught.

‘Looks like we’ve caught ourselves an Assassin,’ sneered one of the three men, ‘only for real this time. There’ll be no slipping your guard. No freeing the constable so that he can rally his men. We’ll be taking you to Miss Lucy Thorne. Let’s see what she wants to do with you.’

She wants to kill me, thought Evie. But even so, they say that every cloud has a silver lining and here was hers. Lucy was in the chapel right now and she was searching for the Shroud. *Certainly*, thought Evie. *Take me to Lucy Thorne. You're only taking me closer to it.*

Any plans she had for escape were swiftly shelved. Instead she relaxed, allowing the blade of the pike to remain where it was, the sword to stay in place. The last thing she wanted to do was draw their attention to her gauntlet.

They did exactly as she wanted them to do. They brought her into the chapel.

Knocking and entering, they came upon Lucy Thorne, who was startled by their entrance and looking unusually flustered. Evidently she'd failed to find the Shroud of Eden, and her cheeks were flushed as she turned to Evie, flanked by her guards in the doorway of the darkened chapel.

'Welcome, Miss Frye,' she hissed. 'Would you care to tell me where the Shroud is?'

Evie said nothing. There was nothing she could say.

'As you wish,' said Lucy. 'I shall find it without your help. And then I'll strangle you with it.' She stalked across the room, hands going to the panelling, pressing her ear close to the wood to listen for telltale hollowing and the sound of secret compartments within.

At the same time, Evie was readying herself for battle, sizing up her enemy. In the chapel were four opponents, but Lucy Thorne had already fought Evie once and lost. She was depending on the Yeoman Warders, who were off their guard. They thought that having delivered Evie into the custody of Lucy Thorne their job was done.

Evie allowed her arm to drop a fraction, removing it from the immediate threat of the Wilkinson sword and then, all at once, dropped to one knee, engaged her own blade and buried it into the groin of the man standing nearest to her.

It was ugly but it produced a lot of noise and blood and, as she had often been taught, a lot of noise and blood is as helpful as surprise when it comes to a successful attack.

The guard fell screaming; his comrades shouted. But the pike had already been removed from her neck and with one gloved hand on the stone floor she was pivoting in order to face the second man. It was as though she punched him in the stomach, only with blade and gauntlet, and the blow drove him across the room, clutching at a stomach wound that would bleed out in a matter of seconds.

When it came to the third man, she wasn't so lucky. He had not been able to bring his pike to bear but instead used the pikestaff, swinging it round to clobber

her on the side of the head. She staggered, knowing the lack of pain for what it was – a delayed agony – and slicing wildly with the blade.

She caught his clothes, opened a gash, but it wasn't nearly enough to finish him off. He darted to one side, more agile than he looked, and tried to hit her again with the pikestaff, aiming once more for the side of her head.

This time, however, he missed but she didn't. Her strike was true, and she rammed it into his heart so that he fell, dead almost before he hit the floor. The other two men writhed and screamed, their final death throes noisy, but Evie was launching herself at Lucy Thorne, blade out, knocking aside the boot knife that had appeared, relishing the surprise and fear in her opponent's eyes, knowing the battle was won and allowing herself the grim satisfaction of feeling her blade strike home.

And now, at last, Lucy Thorne lay dying. Evie regarded her, almost surprised at her own lack of pity. 'You sought a tool of healing in order to extend your own power,' she said simply.

'Not mine, ours. You are so short-sighted. You'd hoard power and never use it, when we would better the condition of humanity. I hope you never find the Shroud. You have no idea what it truly can do.'

Curious, Evie bent to her. 'Tell me then.'

It was as if, in the last moment, Lucy Thorne decided against it. 'No,' she smiled, and died.

Evie reached into her jacket for her handkerchief, which she carefully spotted with Lucy Thorne's blood, folding it and replacing it. Next she retrieved the key then stared dispassionately around St John's Chapel. The warders were dead in pools of their own blood; Lucy Thorne lay looking almost serene. Evie paid them silent compliment, then left and made her way back along the flickering passages of the keep until she reached the entrance. There she stood at the top of the steps and looked out over the courtyard, where the constable and Henry Green's Yeoman ally were rallying their men now the battle was won.

The Shroud was not here, she thought. But the Tower of London had been returned to the Crown, and that at least meant a job well done for Evie Frye.

During her journey back to base her thoughts went to Lucy's last words. It was true, Evie had thought of it as an instrument of healing. Naively, perhaps, given the Templars' interest. But then she had learnt it gave eternal life – and now this. Was it possible that Lucy Thorne had known something Evie didn't? Mulling over it, she remembered something she had read once, a long time ago. And then later, as soon as she was able, Evie put pen to paper and wrote to George Westhouse.

76

Crawford Starrick couldn't remember when he had last partaken of his beloved tea. His usually ordered life had taken on a distinctly chaotic tinge. The stress was beginning to show.

Not only had Lucy Thorne been stymied in her efforts to find the Shroud, largely due to the interruptions of Evie Frye, but the other Frye twin – it hurt Starrick to even think his name, *Jacob* – had also been causing trouble. Templar agents were falling beneath his blade; plans the Order had spent years laying in place were being undone. Starrick had come to dread the knock on his office door, for every time one of his men arrived it was with more bad news. Another member of the Order dead. Another scheme confounded.

Now he raised his head from his hands and regarded the nervous scrivener who sat on the other side of his untidy desk, patiently awaiting his dictation. Starrick took a deep breath that was indistinguishable from a sigh and said, 'Take this down, then I want it sealed until you receive further orders.'

He closed his eyes, composing himself, and began his dictation: 'Miss Thorne. You supplied me with the means to secure London's future. The city thanks you. The Order thanks you. I thank you. But the Shroud can be worn by only one. Therefore, I hereby dissolve this partnership. I promise to endow you with an income into your old age, but that is the most I can do. May the father of understanding guide you.'

There. It was done. Starrick sat listening to the scratch of the secretary's pen as his words were duly transcribed. *Yes*, he thought, *the Shroud can be worn by only one*, and he found himself relaxing almost sleepily in the knowledge that it was his destiny to be *the one*.

A knock at the door startled him from his absorption and straightaway he felt his jaw clench, reality intruding with the promise of more bad news, further havoc wreaked by the junior Frye club.

In that regard at least, he was not disappointed. 'What is it?' he snapped.

Entering, an assistant looked nervous. One hand fiddled at his collar, loosening it. 'Miss Thorne, sir …' he said in a faltering voice.

'What of her?'

‘I’m sorry, sir. She’s dead.’

One thing his associates had learnt – or been forced to learn – was that you never knew with Starrick what he was going to do next. The two attendants held their breath as his shoulders rose and fell heavily and his hands went to his face as he absorbed the news.

All of a sudden he peeked through his fingers. ‘Where is the key?’ he said.

The assistant cleared his throat. ‘There was no key found on her body, sir.’

Starrick’s fingers closed as he contemplated this new and even more unwelcome development. Next his attention went to a bowl on his desk that he began to turn over in his hands. His face was reddening. His men knew what was to come. One of his outbursts. And sure enough, the room was filled with his frustrated shriek, his hair, usually so neat with pomade, in disarray as the bowl was lifted high, about to be dashed to the tabletop, until …

The shriek died down. With exaggerated care, Starrick placed the bowl on the table. ‘The Shroud will be mine,’ he said, to himself more than his men. ‘Even if I have to raise hellfire to do it.’

77

‘Please tell me again where we’re going,’ said Evie, as she and Henry passed through iron gates and towards a set of benches at the opposite end of a leafy square.

In truth, she had been enjoying the walk. Time spent with Henry was a blissful antidote to the killing that had become so routine in her life. Her father had always warned her against becoming inured to it. ‘A killing machine is a machine, and we Assassins are not machines,’ he said, making her promise never to lose her empathy. Never to forget her humanity.

At the time she had wondered how that could ever happen. After all, she had been brought up to respect life. How on earth could she fail to be moved by the taking of it? But of course the inevitable had happened, and she had discovered that one way to cope with slaughter was to shut herself off from it, disallowing access to those parts of her brain that wanted to reflect upon it. And more and more she found it a simple process to do that, so that sometimes she worried she’d lose all sense of her true self in her own survival mechanism.

Henry was a means of pulling back from all that. Her feelings for him helped Evie to centre herself, and his reticence to take up arms served to remind her that there could be another way. He had told her about his life before he met her. She knew that he had once been where she was now and had returned from it. His was a tattered soul but nevertheless intact. He was an example of how it could be done.

Still, now came the next phase of their mission to retake London, and whatever her feelings for Henry they would have to wait. Restoring the Brotherhood was her main priority.

They were close now. So close. Since events at the Tower the twins had struck again and again at the heart of the Templar organization. They had hit them where it hurt most. In the wallet. After neutralizing Twopenny, Jacob had closed down a counterfeit ring, helping to restore order to the city. Jacob had also put an end to the activities of Brudenell, who was working for the Order by trying to prevent the passage of legislation harmful to them.

Each successful operation had seen the Assassins' stature grow in the eyes of those in the East End and even beyond; Henry's gang grew exponentially. The Templars might have taken London by worming their way into its middle echelons but the Assassins were reclaiming it by working their way up from the bottom. The urchins who streamed through the streets saw the Assassins as champions and were eager to help in any way; their elders were more cautious and more frightened but offered their tacit approval. Henry would often return to his shop and discover goodwill gifts left on the doorstep.

All of this was of benefit of course. But in Evie's mind (though not in Jacob's) it took second place to issues of the Shroud. Now they had recovered the key, they still faced the problem of not knowing where it was kept. They knew where it wasn't – it wasn't in the Tower of London. But where could it be?

And so she asked Henry again, 'Where are we going?'

'I found a letter from the Prince Consort among Lucy Thorne's research,' he told her, 'dated 1847.'

The Prince Consort. Prince Albert for whom Queen Victoria mourned still.

'1847?' she said.

'The year the prince began renovations to Buckingham Palace,' he explained.

'You think he added a vault for the Shroud?' asked Evie excitedly.

Henry nodded, smiling at the same time, pleased to bask in Evie's approval. 'And since no map of the palace has a room marked "secret vault" …'

By now they were near the benches where there sat a very singular-looking man. An Indian gentleman, he had a rounded well-fed face that made him look boyish. Nevertheless there was a handsomeness about him. A bearing. He wore silks. Expensive silks.

He folded his paper, placed it down and rose to meet them as they approached. 'Your Highness,' said Henry with a short bow. A somewhat begrudging short bow, if Evie wasn't very much mistaken. 'May I present Miss Evie Frye. Miss Frye, Maharajah Duleep Singh.'

Evie and Singh greeted one another, before Singh's face became grave and he turned to Henry. 'My friend, the plans you asked for have been removed.'

'Removed? By whom?'

'Crawford Starrick's forces. Or someone employed by him.'

Singh saw Evie and Henry's faces fall. 'Yes, I thought you might recognize that name. I know where they are, but it is heavily guarded.'

Evie threw her shoulders back. 'That part will not be a problem.'

Singh looked her up and down. 'I thought not.'

It was a short while later that Evie and Henry were crouched on a rooftop, having raced each other to the top (winner: Evie) where they overlooked a fortress building they knew to be a Templar stronghold.

In there were the documents they sought, taken by Crawford Starrick, who had clearly reached the same conclusion they had.

However, *he* didn't have the key. They did. And now they wanted the documents.

Problem one was the guards. Henry counted sentries at the windows of what might have been a small fortress but was well guarded. He saw men in the window, at the gate, guarding the grounds that surrounded it.

'We're going to need a plan,' said Evie simply.

'I can provide a distraction for the guards while you discover a way inside,' Henry told her, and she looked at him. 'Really?' she said with a mix of concern and surprise, not sure if he was ready, and then – did she imagine it? Or did he blush? 'For you, Evie,' he said, 'certainly.'

'Well,' she said, 'once I'm inside, I shall find someone who knows where the papers are stored.'

'And we will meet later,' he told her, and then turned to leave.

'Be careful,' she told his retreating back softly.

He provided just the distraction she needed. The guards on the nearside began to disperse at the noise and she used the opportunity to scale the wall and let herself into a first-floor window. This was the administrative centre where, if she wasn't very much mistaken, the plans should have been stored.

She was either very much mistaken or the plans were elsewhere. She had a brief look around the office into which she had climbed but there was nothing there. *Right*, she thought, *now for Plan B. Find somebody and interrogate him*.

She went to the office door and listened carefully for sounds from the passageway. Satisfied, she waited and then, as a lone guard made his way past, yanked open the door, rabbit-punched him in the throat, crooked her right arm round his neck and dragged him into the office and closed the door.

He sprawled to the floor, gagging with the pain of the rabbit punch and scarcely able to believe the sight of his assailant. In a second Evie was standing astride him and he stared up at her with terrified eyes, babbling. 'I swear, miss, I do not know where they've taken him.'

Her one hand held his collars, gauntlet fist drawn back, ready to threaten him with another even more painful blow, but checked herself. *Taken him?*

'Taken who?' she snapped.

'The man dressed like you. The guards dragged him off …' the guard said.

Damn. 'Henry.' She gathered herself. 'The plans you stole. Where are they?'

He shook his head furiously. ‘I don’t know anything about that.’

She believed him, and with a quick jab of the gauntlet left him unconscious. Now she had a decision to make. Continue her search for the plans? Or rescue Henry?

Except, there really was no decision.

78

Outside in the street, Evie got her first break when she ran into one of Henry's urchin informants.

'They've got him, miss,' she was told. 'They took Mr Henry. We couldn't stop them. They dragged him off in a red carriage. They won't get far, though. One wheel looks like it was about ready to fall off. You can see the cart tracks. It looks all wobbly like.'

She thanked him and thanked her lucky stars that the Assassins could count on the support of the people. Let the Templars try to track a carriage through the streets of London without the eyes and ears of the populace to aid them. Just let them try.

And so she followed the tracks made by the carriage, weaving her way quickly through the crowded streets, just a fast-moving face in the crowd until she came close to Covent Garden, where she found the carriage abandoned.

She dashed on to the piazza, hoping to catch sight of Henry and his captors, but there was no sign of them. A trader nearby was looking her way with an admiring glance, so she hurried over – time to use her feminine wiles. 'Did you see some men get out of that carriage?' she asked him, with the sweetest smile she could manage.

He simpered. 'Yes, they pulled someone out. Dead drunk, he was. They carried him into the churchyard. Maybe he wanted a quiet place to sleep it off?'

Next to him was a stall selling oils. 'Yeah,' called the trader, doffing his cap at Evie, 'I saw them dragging someone out after the wheel fell off. They said he'd hit his head. Not sure why they needed to take him into the church, but that's where they went.'

Both were directing her attention across the piazza to the familiar portico piers and columns of St Paul's Church at the west end. Despite the tall buildings on every other side, it still loomed over the square. On any other day it would have been impressive, a sight to behold. Now, however, Evie looked at it and saw a mausoleum. She saw dread.

She thanked her two admirers, crossed the square and went to the churchyard at the back, glancing at the equally impressive portico at the church's rear as she

threaded her way through the dark churchyard, quickly at first, and then with more caution when she heard voices in the near distance.

She was at the back of the churchyard now, where the undergrowth was thick and untended, when she came across what she could only describe as a Templar encampment. In the middle of it was Henry trussed to a chair, guards standing over him. With a jolt of shock she thought they might have killed him. His head lolled on his chest. On second thoughts there was nothing about the way they were talking that suggested he might be dead.

'Why did you bring him here?' one of the men was saying.

'The man is an Assassin,' replied his colleague. 'We didn't want him getting away before you had a chance to question him, now, did we?'

The first guard was anxious and jumpy about something. 'He was more secure where he was before. I told you not to come here.'

'It can't be helped. Now, wake him up.'

It was while the second guard was trying to shake Henry awake that Evie made her move, dashing out of the shadows with her blade drawn. She made short work of her opponents. She had no desire to prolong the fight even for the sake of her enemy's dignity or her own pride. She merely finished it, quickly and ruthlessly.

How different she was to the callow Assassin who had first embarked on this mission.

Only when they lay at her feet did she go to Henry, rushing to untie him.

'Did they hurt you?' she asked him.

He shook his head. 'I'm fine. Listen, they sent someone back to move the architectural plans. Do you have them?'

Now it was her turn to shake her head.

'My capture has undone your plans,' he said as they made their escape. 'I'm sorry.'

Disconsolate, they made their way back to base.

79

Crawford Starrick was preparing for a party. A very important party. One for which he had great plans.

A servant bustled and fussed around him, fixing his dinner jacket and waistcoat, flicking dust from the shoulders, adjusting his tie.

Starrick, meanwhile, admired himself in the mirror, listening to the sound of his own voice as he opined, ‘Order has bred disorder. The sea rises to flood the pubs and extinguish the street lamps. Our city will die. Twopenny has failed, Lucy has failed, Brudenell, Elliotson, Attaway. All have gone into the night. It is up to me now. The Assassins have brought nature’s fury into our homes. Men have become monsters, barrelling towards us, teeth out. Our civilization must survive this onslaught.’

His servant had finished his work. Crawford Starrick turned to go. ‘To prevent the return of the dark ages,’ he said, ‘I will start anew. London must be reborn.’

80

They were arguing again: Evie and Jacob. Watching them, Henry found his feelings conflicted. On the one hand, he hated to see the twins at each other's throats, and yet on the other, he could feel himself falling in love with Evie Frye and wanted her all to himself.

Selfish, yes. But there it was. Hardly worth denying. He wanted Evie Frye to himself and if she was at loggerheads with her brother, well, then that day would arrive even more quickly.

Meanwhile, the argument raged on.

'Starrick is making his move,' Evie was saying. 'The Piece of Eden is somewhere inside Buckingham Palace.'

'Let him have it,' Jacob retorted.

He was still full of arrogance, noted Henry. In many ways he had every right to be; so much of what he'd done had been so very successful. His latest triumph involved the assassination of Maxwell Roth. Henry could remember a time when he had leafed through documents full of Templar names given to him by Ethan. Thanks to Jacob, most, if not all, were out of action or incapacitated. Quite some feat.

And yet Evie, who was so fixated on finding the Shroud, couldn't see past the devastation he had caused.

'I have seen your handiwork across the city,' she was telling her brother now. 'You "suffer the penalty of too much haste, which is too little speed".'

He rounded on her. 'Don't you quote Father at me.'

'That's Plato,' she corrected him witheringly. 'I am dreadfully sorry this doesn't involve anything you can destroy. Father was right. He never approved of your methods.'

'Evie, Father is dead …'

And now it was time for Henry to step in. 'Enough! I have just received word from my spies. At the palace ball tonight, Starrick plans to steal the Piece of Eden, then eliminate the heads of church and state.'

Which changed things.

Evie and Jacob looked at one another and knew that thanks to what was Starrick's last throw of the dice, a final, desperate attempt to win back what the twins had so far cost him, he had unwittingly synchronized her obsession with the Shroud and his need to wrest control via more traditional means.

What passed between them was that knowledge. A begrudging knowledge. But a knowledge all the same.

'Once more, for old times' sake?' said Jacob with one raised eyebrow, and for a moment she remembered what it was they had between them and she mourned its passing. Who could ever have known that carrying out their father's wishes would end up tearing them apart?

'And then we're finished,' she told him with a hard heart.

'Agreed with pleasure,' he said, adding, 'So what's the plan?'

The plan involved utilizing a relationship formed with Benjamin and Mary Anne Disraeli in order to steal invitations to the party – from none other than the Gladstones.

Evie set about arranging another meeting with Singh while Jacob was tasked with stealing the invitations – a job for which he was ideally suited. Being able to lift the invitation from a besotted Catherine Gladstone, Jacob also set about stealing the Gladstones' carriage. The fact that the invitation stated that 'swords must be left at the door' they decided was a matter best left to Frederick Abberline, who promised to smuggle the weapons they needed inside the palace grounds. It involved Jacob having to steal a uniform. Meanwhile, Evie met with Duleep Singh, who told her the plans had been removed to the queen's personal papers in the White Drawing room.

Now she knew where the documents were kept. And thanks to Jacob they had a carriage. They had the means of smuggling weapons into the palace. They had invitations.

The game was afoot.

81

Prior to setting out, Evie studied the available plans of the palace: the eastern frontage where they would enter; the west wing, where the terrace for the ball would soon host dancing; and then inside, the five floors and over seven hundred rooms.

There was only one she was interested in, though. The White Drawing Room, and it was to there that she would go as soon as she was able. Go to the White Drawing Room, steal the blueprints, locate the vault, find the Shroud.

She and Jacob sat in the Gladstones' carriage, with the couple's invitations clutched tight as they joined a procession of carriages making their way towards the palace at the western end of The Mall. Did Evie imagine it, or was there a certain excitement in the air? After all, the queen had mostly shunned public appearances since the death of the Prince Consort, Albert. She had been the subject of some lampoonery as a result. However, it was reputed that she was to be making an appearance at her own ball tonight.

As they reached the main entrance, Evie saw immediately that the queen's appearance was unlikely to be the night's only talking point. Their coach passed Mr and Mrs Gladstone arguing with palace guards who wore bearskin hats and carried rifles with bayonets attached. Mr and Mrs Gladstone in full flight were not to be trifled with, but then again neither were the Queen's Guard, and the two parties seemed to have reached an impasse. Evie slipped down a little in her carriage seat as they passed, thankfully unnoticed by the Gladstones, still occupied in alternately threatening and pleading with the Queen's Guard.

Out of sight now, their carriage clattered on cobbles through the columns of the entranceway and into the front courtyard of the palace. At the top of the queue immaculately attired footmen were either shouting angry orders at coach drivers, or opening carriage doors so that the distinguished personages within might step out and make their way into the main reception hall. In there, they would ascend the Grand Staircase and make their way either to the ballroom or the terrace. The party was already in full swing.

Meanwhile, as they sat in their carriage and awaited their turn to be decanted into high society, Evie and Jacob exchanged glances. An admission of nerves.

Good luck. Take care. It was all in the look they shared.

'I shall go to find the Piece of Eden,' she told him.

He pursed his lips. 'As you wish. I am off to meet Freddie.'

And then the door to their carriage was opened and they looked out upon bowing blank-faced footmen and then to the steps that led to the open doors of the palace, again flanked by footmen, a steady stream of immaculate guests making their way inside.

Well, at least they looked the part. Jacob in a formal suit for the occasion, Evie in satin trimmed with lace, a bodice, satin slippers, skirts and wire ruches. She felt trussed up. A turkey ready for Christmas dinner. Still, she blended in, that was for certain; except where most of the female guests wore diamond-encrusted necklaces, Evie had the vault key hanging on a chain at her throat. She had been through an awful lot to secure that key. She wasn't about to let it out of her sight.

Just as they stepped down from the carriage they heard a cry some distance away. 'That's my carriage!' The plaintive indignant shout of the Prime Minister-to-be, Gladstone, a shout that thankfully went unacknowledged.

Now they split up. Jacob slipped off to meet Abberline, secure weapons, then somehow prevent Starrick's plot to slaughter high society, while Evie had a White Drawing Room to find. Like other guests, she made her way to the Grand Staircase, deliberately joining crowds and keeping a low profile as she was carried along in a tide of silks and suits and polite conversation and hushed gossip. She smiled and nodded if spoken to, playing the part of a young debutante to perfection.

Leaving the stream of guests for a corridor to her left, she heard a well-meaning voice from behind her say, 'My dear, the ballroom is this way,' but pretended not to hear, creeping away, silently treading the luxurious Axminster in her satin slippers as she made her way deeper into the palace.

She moved silently, like a wraith, every sense alert for guards so she would hear them before they saw her. Sure enough, she picked up the sound of approaching footsteps and a murmur of voices, so let herself into an office. It was sparsely furnished, closed shutters letting in the only light, and she stayed by the door, open a crack in order to let the guards pass.

As they did she peeped through the crack and got a good look at them. They wore the uniform of the Queen's Guard but there was something about them. Something less ordered, less smart.

Imposters.

Of course. Starrick had infiltrated the guard, posting his own men inside and outside the palace. How else could they hope to pull off what was basically to be

a massacre? She swallowed, hoping that at this very moment, Jacob would be learning the same from Abberline.

She let herself out of the office and back on to the Axminster carpet, hurrying along the corridor. She found her way to the White Drawing Room and let herself in. There she hunted for the plans she needed, keeping one ear on anything happening outside.

She found them. Spreading them out on a desk, she bit her lip with the excitement of her find. Unlike the plans of the palace she had already studied, these included *everything*. Every room was accounted for, every corridor and passageway marked. These were the Prince Consort's personal plans.

And …

She caught her breath.

There was the vault.

She wished Henry were here to see this. She savoured the thought of his reaction. In fact, she thought, she savoured the thought of spending a lot more time with Henry Green when this was all over.

But that was for later. Right now she could only hope Jacob was neutralizing the threat from Starrick's men so she could concentrate on making her way down to the vault. She went to go, then caught sight of herself in a long mirror at one end of the drawing room, adjusted herself, smoothed her dresses, and then, with the blueprints hidden in her cleavage, let herself out of the drawing room and on to the corridor beyond. She made one more stop to avoid sentries along the way and then was quickly back into the throng of guests, anonymous and invisible once again. Now for the vault …

Just then came a voice that stopped her in her tracks. 'There you are.'

Damn. It was Mary Anne Disraeli, a friend and ally, and not someone to be easily palmed off.

'I have someone I am simply *dying* for you to meet!' exclaimed Mrs Disraeli and, brooking no argument, took Evie by the upper arm, leading her through the guests, skirting the ballroom and to the terrace outside. There stood a woman that Evie Frye recognized. Such a recognizable woman, in fact, that the young Assassin had a moment of simply being unable to believe her own eyes.

'Your Majesty,' said Mary Anne Disraeli, giving Evie a surreptitious squeeze to remind her to curtsey, 'may I present Miss Evie Frye.'

Her Royal Highness, wearing the dark garb that was now her custom and an expression to match, looked upon Evie with a mixture of disinterest and distaste, and then quite unexpectedly said, 'You are the one responsible for Mr Gladstone's mishap?'

Evie blanched. The game was up. They had been discovered. ‘Y-your Majesty, I apologize …’ she stammered.

And yet … the queen was smiling. Apparently Gladstone’s ‘mishap’ had left her most amused. ‘The cake is particularly good,’ she told Evie. ‘Enjoy the ball.’

With that she turned and left, a footman scurrying to her side. Dazed, Evie simply stood and gawped, too late realizing that she was all of a sudden the centre of attention. She was in plain sight, and not hiding.

She moved to quickly go, but the damage was done and a hand grasped her upper arm, and this time it wasn’t the friendly, assuring grip of Mary Anne Disraeli, who had drifted off in search of more socializing. No, this was the firm custodial grasp of Crawford Starrick.

‘May I have this dance … Miss Frye?’ he said.

It was a breach in protocol that drew gasps from those around them, but Crawford Starrick didn’t seem to care about that as he led Evie to the middle of the terrace – just as the orchestra began to play a mazurka.

‘Mr Starrick,’ said Evie, joining him in the dance, hoping she sounded more in command of the situation than she felt. ‘You’ve had your fun, but the game is over.’

But Starrick wasn’t listening. Eyes half closed, he seemed transported by the music. Evie took the opportunity to study his face. With satisfaction she noted the tiredness and anxiety written into the dark rings and wrinkles round his eyes. The Assassins’ activities had truly taken their toll on the Templar Grand Master. Any other leader might have considered capitulation, but not Crawford Starrick.

She wondered about his state of mind. She wondered about a man so consumed with victory he wasn’t able to admit defeat.

‘One, two, three,’ he was saying, and she realized that he was gesturing around them at the rooftops overlooking the crowded terraces. Her eyes went to where he was looking. Yes. There they were. Men in the uniform of the Queen’s Guard but evidently Templar marksmen, half a dozen or so. As she watched, they levelled their rifles, pointing them into the courtyard below, awaiting a signal.

The massacre was about to begin.

‘Time is a wonderful thing, Miss Frye,’ Starrick was saying. ‘It heals all wounds. We may make mistakes while dancing, but the mazurka ends and then we begin again. The problem is that everyone forgets. They trip on the same mistakes over and over again.’

Evie tracked her eyes from the men on the rooftops, expecting the shooting to begin at any second. What was he waiting for?

And then he told her. ‘This dance is nearly over. Soon the people will forget the generation on this terrace, the ruin you nearly wrought on London. When the music ceases, Miss Frye, your time is up and mine begins once more.’

So that was the signal the men were waiting for.

The orchestra played on.

82

When the mazurka ended …

Evie's gaze went to the rooftops again and her heart leapt to see the familiar figure of Jacob, now in his Assassin's clothes, as he moved in on one of the marksmen and slit his throat.

She knew her brother. She knew that if there was one thing she could depend on him for, it was to get this particular job done.

And he did. By the time the dance was ended, the rooftops were empty and Starrick was suddenly roused from his reverie. Furious then frantic, his eyes went to the rooftops, saw them empty and then found the smiling face of his dance partner as she said, 'I have a feeling someone is about to cut in …'

He bared his teeth. 'Then with regret I will relinquish you.'

He was fast. His hand had reached to snatch the key from her neck before she had a chance to stop him. Then he turned and was hurrying away, leaving Evie gasping, her hand at her throat. Around her came outraged cries. 'Did you see that? Did you see what he did?'

She moved quickly away in Starrick's wake but lost him in the crowd. Behind her scandal raged but she put her head down and made her way to the edge of the terrace, grateful for the sight of Jacob who took advantage of the sudden tumult to emerge.

She pulled the papers from her décolletage, thrust them into Jacob's hands. 'Here,' she said quickly, breathlessly. 'The location of the vault. Go.'

He looked at the plans, eyebrows knitted. 'Just like that? No plan?'

'No time for plans. I'll catch up as soon as I'm rid of this –' she gestured at the hated dress, took her gauntlet from Jacob's outstretched hand scooped up a satchel containing her Assassin's garb, and then made off in search of a suitable spot for her transformation.

Jacob ran. The vault marked on the blueprint was located close to the wine vaults, and presumably had been constructed at the same time before being struck from the plans and disappearing into secrecy. Its door was hidden,

seemingly just another section of ornate panelling. But as Jacob arrived he saw it ajar, no doubt opened with the key that Crawford Starrick had stolen from Evie.

The party was a long way behind him now. Probably they were still clutching their pearls after what happened between Starrick and Evie. This part of the palace was deserted, silent.

Except not that silent. As Jacob made his way along a narrow tunnel towards the vault he heard the dull thump of an explosion from ahead. Starrick had unsealed the vault.

Jacob tensed. He heard his knuckles crack. His blade made less noise as he flexed his forearm to engage it.

Even more cautiously now he made his way towards the blown-out vault door. Stepping through he found himself in a room of medieval architecture. So, it was older than the wine vaults, which dated back to the remodelling of the palace in the 1760s. In fact, it looked very much to Jacob as though the current palace had been built on top of the vault.

Despite himself, he suppressed a smile. How Evie would have loved to have made this discovery for herself.

At the centre of the vault stood the Templar Grand Master, having opened a box he'd found there. The trunk was a receptacle the like of which Jacob had never seen before. A dark grey futuristic rectangle inset with strange angular indentations, inscriptions and carry handles. And for a second all he could do was stare at it, as transfixed by it as Starrick. Just to lay eyes on the crate was enough to convince him that there was something other-worldly and unknowable about it. Perhaps Evie was right to place such store in these artefacts.

Crawford Starrick still wore his suit, but draped over it was a shimmering piece of linen that appeared to exude the same sense of suppressed energy and menace as the box. Even as Jacob watched, patterns seemed to form and dissemble on the golden cloth, and different colours glowed. Inside the box was a series of what looked like decorative baubles, and either they too hummed with power or were reflecting it from the crate. Still Jacob was hypnotized, falling into deep belief, feeling the call of the artefacts – until, with an effort, he shook his head to free himself of it, stitched the smile back on his face and stepped forward to greet the Grand Master.

'Aren't we a little too old to put faith in magic?' he said.

Starrick looked up at him with a puzzling expression that Evie Fry might have recognized from the dance. Only now he was so transported it was almost beatific.

'Come now,' he said with a smile. 'Allow an old man his indulgences.'

'I will allow you nothing,' said Jacob, bemused and stepping forward.

Starrick took no steps to defend himself, merely smiled indulgently. The smile of the truly wise. ‘The young think they can make their mark on this world, a world entirely built to exploit them.’

Jacob shook his head and drew himself up to gang-leader stature. ‘I don’t think I can make my mark, old man, I know.’

Starrick’s face hardened. He was back in the here and now, drawing ancient power from his find.

And then Jacob attacked.

83

Henry had decided. He would leave the Assassins to whom he had become a burden, and leave Evie to whom he was a liability. He had spent his entire life running away from the knowledge that he was an unfit Assassin. Held prisoner in the grounds of St Paul's Church, Covent Garden, Henry understood that it had caught up with him.

Awash with memories, he had closed up shop and extinguished the lights at the front, retiring behind the curtain to his workroom. Clocks ticked and he wondered what Evie was doing now. No doubt she and Jacob were arriving at the Queen's Ball. When they returned it would be the end of the line. Either way, win or lose, this battle would have been fought to its conclusion: the Assassins would be once more in the ascendance, with the rule of the London Templars at an end, or they would be having to retreat, regroup, think again.

And Henry? He sat at the central table, with documents and inscriptions laid out around him, maps and plans over which he and Evie had pored, and put his face in his hands, thinking back to his life as a child and the years he had spent as The Ghost. A lifetime of delusion and shattered dreams and failure.

Years ago he'd thought of leaving the Brotherhood. *You can't turn your back on a belief*, he'd thought at the time.

Yes, he decided now. Yes you could.

He drew a blank piece of paper towards him, reached for his stylus and inkwell.

'Dear Evie,' he wrote.

And then he was stopped by a sound from the front of the shop. It came again. Knocking.

Henry stood, reached for his blade and began to strap it on as he moved through the curtain, bare feet noiseless on the floorboards as he traversed the clutter of the shop to the door. He shook his sleeve, obscuring the blade and studied the glass of the door where he could see a figure, an outline he recognized at once.

'Come in,' he said, opening the door and throwing glances up and down the busy Whitechapel street outside.

Over the threshold, stepping from the balmy evening outside into the darkened, oppressive atmosphere of Henry's shop, came George Westhouse. 'You're armed,' he said, by way of a greeting. Trained eyes.

'We have the Templars cornered,' replied Henry, 'and you know what a cornered rat does?'

'It attacks shopkeepers?' said George.

Henry tried to force a smile but smiles never came easily to him and sure enough the muscles refused to obey. Instead he closed the bolts, turned and led George through the tottering shelves to his workroom. There he brushed aside the letter he had begun and directed George to a chair; previous occupant, Evie Frye.

George carried a small leather satchel that he placed on the tabletop as he sat down. 'Perhaps you'd like to fill me in on events in the city?' he said.

Henry told him how, with the help of his information network, Jacob had organized the gangs in the East End, then successfully carried out a series of operations against the Templars, severely weakening their position; how he and Evie had discovered the likely location of the latest Piece of Eden; how Evie and Jacob were at this very moment at the Queen's Ball, Evie seeking the vault where the Shroud was kept …

At mention of the artefact George's eyebrows raised.

Yes, thought Henry, more accursed artefacts. More death in the name of baubles.

'And you've had a willing cohort in the shape of Evie Frye, no doubt?'

'We had different reasons for seeking the Piece of Eden,' agreed Henry. 'She wanted to witness it. She wanted to look upon the powers of the First Civilization. I had already done so. I wanted to make sure that that power never fell into the hands of the Templars.'

'"Had" you say …'

'I beg your pardon.'

'You said you *had* very different reasons for seeking out the Piece of Eden. What makes you think these events belong in the past tense?'

'I have every faith in the twins. Even if Evie should fail to recover the Shroud then I am confident Jacob will neutralize Crawford Starrick. Either way, the Piece of Eden will be safe for the time being.'

'And that's it, is it?' George pointed across the table to where Henry's 'Dear Evie' letter lay. 'Nothing else?'

Henry looked at him. 'No,' he said. 'Nothing else.'

George nodded sagely. 'Well, then good. That's very good. Because, you know, as Ethan told you, and as your mother told you, the Assassins need their

analytical minds as much as they need their warriors.'

Henry avoided George's eye. 'A true Assassin would be both.'

'No, no.' George shook his head. 'What you're describing isn't a person, it's an automaton. Our organization – *any* organization – needs a conscience, Henry. It's an important function. We may be slow to recognize it on occasion, but the fact remains it's a vital function. Whatever you do, I'd like you to remember that.'

Henry nodded.

'Right, now that's clear, perhaps I should come to my next order of business …'

George opened the satchel, removed a leather-bound book and slid it across the table to Henry. 'Evie contacted me about this. A book she dimly remembered seeing in her father's library, which may or may not contain some information about the artefact you seek.'

Henry frowned at him and George shrugged. 'Yes, all right, I knew about the Shroud. I merely wanted to hear it from the horse's mouth. Well, *another* horse's mouth.'

Curious, Henry drew the book towards him, slipped open the cover and straightaway felt a tickle of the old excitement. Contained within was what looked to be a series of testimonies handed down throughout the ages – details of battles fought, assassinations carried out, treasures won and lost – all of it referring back to the very earliest years of the English Brotherhood.

Had Evie come across something about the Shroud, perhaps? Something that made no sense to her at the time but which resonated now?

George watched Henry's face with a smile. 'It took some finding, I can tell you,' he said. 'Hopefully it will be of use.' He stood to go. 'No doubt you will want to read it at once, so I shall leave you in peace. You've done well, Henry. Your mother and father will be proud. Ethan would be proud.'

When Henry had locked up after George he returned to the book. They knew that the Shroud was reputed to offer eternal life, and from that Evie assumed the artefact had healing abilities.

However, she had since become convinced that it also contained some greater, perhaps darker power. Her curiosity had sparked a memory; the memory had brought her to this book.

Henry leafed through it quickly now, anticipating what he might find, until he came to a particular entry, one that told of – yes – a shroud. It was written in the most elliptical terms but nevertheless confirmed that it did indeed confer eternal life upon its wearer.

However, the account mentioned something else besides. A negative to its positive. The drawback – or maybe, for some, the advantage – of wearing the Shroud was that it would draw energy from whomsoever he or she touched.

The report concluded that nothing else was known of the Shroud, that what appeared here might be mere gossip or conjecture. Even so, it was enough for Henry to think of Evie – Evie going to the vault without knowing the Shroud's true power.

84

At last Evie was back in her usual clothes. She tossed the dreaded dress to one side, adjusted the clips on her gauntlet and shook her shoulders into her coat at the same time. Once more she caught her own reflection in a window of the small antechamber she had chosen for the quick change, but was altogether happier with the results this time.

Forget that imposter's finery. This was her real self. Her father's daughter.

And now to the vault. Like Jacob she left the ongoing uproar of the party behind and rushed in the direction of where she knew it to be, and like him she arrived to find the door open. She rushed down the slope and into the tunnel, checking herself as she came closer to the open vault door.

From inside came the sounds of a struggle. The unmistakable sound of Jacob in pain. And her blade was already deploying as she rushed towards the portal, crashing through in time to see Starrick wearing the Shroud and pinning Jacob with one hand.

She stood and gawped for a second. It wasn't possible. A man of Starrick's age and build managing to restrain Jacob. Yet there it was. Sourcing power from the Shroud it was as though Starrick was leeching it from Jacob at the same time. 'You do not listen,' she caught him saying as her gaze travelled to an ornately decorated chest. Inside were what looked like jewels that had begun to rise as if of their own accord and glowed malevolently in the murky gloom of the vault. Guardian drones, they began to revolve as if setting up a protective perimeter around the Grand Master and his helpless victim.

She was about to find out how powerful they were, for having taken several steps into the vault she whirled at a noise from behind her. A guard had rushed into the vault, already breathlessly trying to address Starrick. 'Sir, there's –'

But he never finished his words. The sudden movement from the doorway seemed to excite the guardians and a bolt shot from one of them, catching the guard in the face and propelling him backwards – dead before he hit the floor.

As his singed and blackened face lolled she realized it was the movement, the sudden movement that had set them off. She remained still, one eye on the

deadly hovering insects, but also monitoring the centre of the room, where Starrick held her brother captive, sucking the life from him.

The situation was desperate now; Jacob was holding on but only just.

‘London will soon be rid of your chaos!’ Starrick roared. His eyes were wide and wild and saliva flecked his lips. ‘This city was a safe harbour. A light for all humanity. You would rather destroy the fabric of society. What alternatives do you propose? Bedlam?’

Freedom, thought Evie, but stayed silent. Instead she directed her efforts towards her brother, feeling his pain as if it were her own. ‘Jacob, resist,’ she called, and heard her own voice crack with helplessness and frustration. Her brother’s eyes bulged, and the tendons in his neck pulsed so hard she feared they might actually burst.

‘Evie,’ he managed, ‘stay back.’

‘You do not know how to use the artefact,’ Evie called to Starrick. ‘The Shroud was never meant for you.’

But Starrick wasn’t listening. He was applying more pressure to Jacob’s neck, the power surging through him as he did so. He snarled as he went to complete the death grip.

At the same time, as though they sensed events drawing to a close, the guardian drones had withdrawn, their pulsing light fading as they receded. Evie took the chance to dash forward with a shout of defiance. Her blade rose and fell but Starrick was enjoying the assistance of the artefacts and seemed to easily dodge the blow. At least she’d done enough to knock him off balance, though, and in the next instant Jacob was rolling on the stone, gasping and spluttering with his hands at his neck, released at last from the grip of Crawford Starrick.

Suddenly caught by the combined aura of the Shroud, the trunk and drone artefacts, Evie found herself disorientated, and in the next moment was taken by Starrick who held her in the same grip he’d used on Jacob.

‘Another Frye to feed on,’ he shouted triumphantly. His manic gaze bore into Evie. When they’d danced she’d wondered about his state of mind. Now she was in no doubt. Whatever was left of Crawford Starrick was in there somewhere but it was buried deep. He was in some other place. ‘I admire your pluck,’ he was saying, showering her with spittle, ‘but there is little you can accomplish now. Like Jesus himself, I am immortal. Behold the power of the Shroud.’

‘Jesus wore it better,’ she managed, but if Starrick heard her he made no sign, ranting on.

‘I will begin again. And this new London shall be even more magnificent. First you will fall, then the queen.’

Around her the guardians had begun orbiting with greater urgency. It was as if they responded to Starrick's increased emotional intensity. Or perhaps – more likely – they were somehow inextricably linked to the impulses shooting through the Shroud he wore, themselves drawing off his excitement.

Either way, Jacob had pulled himself to his feet but they prevented him from coming any closer. Now it was he who urged her to stay strong and resist the darkness of Starrick's death grip. Bolts shot from the drones, keeping him away.

'No amount of planning or might shall beat me,' Starrick was raving. 'I have history on my side. London deserves a ruler who will remain vigilant, who will prevent the city from devolving into chaos.'

'Chaos that you are about to cause,' she shouted, and came in close, hoping to dodge the guardians and strike at Starrick.

She was too slow. A bolt of energy slammed into her, knocking her to the wall.

Starrick capitalized on this and with an almost unimaginable burst of strength pounced on her, his hand at her neck.

Now the Templar Grand Master held both Evie and Jacob. The power of the Shroud's energy seemed to flow through the linen, through his arms and to the hands he made his claws, gripping the twins harder. Lifting them like trophies. Squeezing. They hung helpless, shoulders thrown back, chins jutting, jaws working with an agony so intense it refused to allow them even to scream.

And Evie felt the very life force was being drawn from her. Short of breath, her vision clouding, her muscles refusing to respond to any of the weak signals of resistance sent by her brain, Starrick's claw-like hands gripped her throat, but it was as if he were driving the point of a pike into her neck.

'Get. Out. Of. My. City,' he snarled and these, she realized, would be the last words she ever heard because his grip was increasing, and her consciousness receding. Thoughts passed through her dying mind. Regrets that she would never have the opportunity to tell Henry how she felt about him. Visit Amritsar with him. How she would never make her peace with Jacob. Tell her brother she loved him. Say sorry things had turned out this way.

85

At first she believed she was hallucinating. Surely the figure in the doorway was an image projected to her in death, an out-of-focus product of wishful thinking? She'd take it with her, she decided. Rather than the grinning, sweating insanity of Starrick, it would be this that she carried with her from this world to the next.

It would be Henry.

She saw his hand rise and fall. Light flashing on silver. Something spinning across the vault towards them.

And then from Starrick came a shout of pain, and his hold relaxed enough on her throat for her to see a knife handle protruding from his chest, a flower of blood already spreading across his shirt.

A familiar voice. Henry. He had come. It really was him in the doorway, resplendent in his robes, activating his blade, moving towards where Starrick was trying but now failing to maintain his grip on the twins.

The guardian drones, she thought, but couldn't say. *Henry, beware the guardians.*

She saw one of them seem to shudder with fury then shoot a bolt of energy that snagged Henry's shoulder hard enough to knock him off his feet and unconscious to the stone. At the same time both twins pulled themselves free, sprawling to the floor and gasping for air even as they arranged themselves into defensive positions, blades at the ready.

They needn't have worried. Starrick looked beaten. Perhaps the guardians were still responding to him but not for much longer.

'You're weakening,' shouted Jacob in triumph. He dodged a shot from a guardian drone. 'You cannot maintain this.'

He was right. Blood was spreading across Starrick's front and the Grand Master was already deathly pale. The probes glowed more faintly, their respective flight paths less certain.

'The Shroud will not protect you,' called Evie.

Starrick bared bloodstained teeth. 'You are wrong,' he said. 'The people of this city, my people, shall supply its energy.' Whatever power the Shroud gave him was fading now.

‘This city is bigger than you will ever be,’ Evie told him.

She and Jacob made to attack, and when Starrick pulled away, the Shroud fluttered off him and to the floor of the vault, releasing its host.

At the same time the guardian drones seemed to lose their energy, as though they too knew the battle was done, and they returned to the ornate First Civilization crate: theatregoers settling down to enjoy the show from the comfort of their box.

Starrick sank to his knees. His shoulders slumped and his head hung, regarding his scarlet shirt.

With Jacob covering Starrick, Evie ran to Henry, dropping to her knees and skidding across the stone towards him. She took his head in her lap and felt for a pulse. It was strong. He was alive, his eyelids already beginning to flutter.

‘Henry,’ she said, to let him know she was near. She cradled his head for a precious moment, allowing herself a kiss. There would be plenty more of those, she promised herself.

But first …

Evie straightened, turned and crossed to where Jacob stood over Starrick.

The twins looked gravely at one another. There was no honour to be had in slaying a mortally wounded man. But there was even less in letting him bleed slowly to death on the stone.

To finish him quickly and humanely was the right way. Their father’s way. The Assassin way.

They came forward.

‘Together,’ said Evie to Jacob and they ran him through.

‘London will perish without me,’ gasped Crawford Starrick as he died.

‘You flatter yourself,’ Jacob told him.

‘I would have made it into a paradise.’

Evie shook her head. ‘The city belongs to the people. You are but one man.’

‘I am at the very top of the order,’ said Starrick with what would be his very last breath.

‘The very top should be barricading their doors,’ stated Jacob. ‘We are the Assassins.’

Yes, thought Evie. She cast her gaze at the carnage in the vault and knew that, for the time being at least, the death was done. Soon, Evie and Jacob would dab their handkerchiefs in Starrick’s blood and then the twins and Henry would leave this vault, and knowing the Shroud’s true power they would leave it behind, to be sealed up and left in the care of the Crown. And tomorrow London would

awaken as a city renewed and together the three Assassins would continue to bring it hope. There would be more battles to fight, she knew. But for now …

Epilogue

Henry was trembling a little he noticed. But that was to be expected. After all, it wasn't every day that …

He composed himself and moved into the room where Evie sat studying the bouquet he had sent her, a perplexed look on her face, and he wondered if he were making a huge error of judgement. And if he was, how he would ever recover.

Because there was no doubting his feelings for her. None at all. He had fallen a little in love with her the second he first saw her. Their time together since had seen that feeling intensify into something so strong it almost felt like sweet pain, like a precious burden – the need to see her each day, just to be with her, breathe the same air as her; what interested her he found just as absorbing, and what made her laugh tickled him too. Just to share a working day with her brought him more happiness than he could remember since childhood. She wiped his soul clean of his years as The Ghost; she scrubbed the slaughter from him. She made him feel whole and new again. His love for her was something he marvelled at, like a rare butterfly, such was its colour and intensity.

And yet, like a butterfly, it could so easily take flight and escape.

Certainly Henry *thought* she felt the same way about him, but, aye, like Hamlet said, there's the rub; he couldn't be absolutely sure. All that time they had spent together researching the artefact had brought them closer, and for him feelings of friendship and attraction had swiftly blossomed into the love he felt now, this glorious renewal. But for her? Almost exactly a month ago she'd rewarded him with a kiss for saving her life. Was he reading too much into what might simply have been a hurried thank-you?

It was not long after those epochal events at the palace that he had found her in her study one day. She sat with one leg pulled beneath herself, leaning forward, arms on the tabletop, a pose he knew well, and he was sure that she blushed a little at the sight of him as he entered the room.

(But then again, on the other hand, maybe she didn't.)

He'd placed his still-empty herbarium on the tabletop before her and watched her eyes go from her own reading to its cover.

'A herbarium?' she said. 'Are you collecting flowers for someone?'

‘Only myself,’ he replied. ‘I’m told it’s something of a British pastime. Did you know they all have symbolic meanings?’

‘I had heard something of the sort,’ she said.

‘Of course you have. Unfortunately, I’ve had no time to fill the book.’

‘I’m sure I can find some samples, if you’d accept my help.’

‘I would appreciate that. Thank you, Miss Frye.’

And so they had, building up an impressive collection together over the weeks, searching for the meaning of their own relationship just as surely as they deciphered messages in flora.

‘Mignonette: your qualities surpass your charms,’ she said one day, as they pored over the now-bulging herbarium.

‘I’m not entirely sure if that’s meant as a compliment. “Love-in-a-mist”, that’s a pretty name.’

‘Alternately called “devil in the bush”’

They looked at each other and laughed.

‘Narcissus: self-love,’ she said, pointing it out. ‘I should buy a bouquet for Jacob.’

‘Unkind, Miss Frye,’ laughed Henry, but pleased – pleased the twins were reconciled – and pleased that she was able to see Jacob with a little more perspective.

‘Amusing as this all is, I really should get back to work. If you need me …’

‘I’ll send a bouquet,’ he said.

‘Of Irises.’

‘“A message.” Indeed.’

And so he had. He had assembled a delightful nosegay of iris, snowdrop, strawberry flower and red tulip, each of them well chosen, selected to say something he himself was finding it so hard to express. The man in the mirror scoffed at his indecision and uncertainty. *Of course she feels the same way. She kissed you at the vault.* The man who stood before it couldn’t be so sure.

‘A message …’ he watched her say, as her fingertips went to the snowdrop and strawberry, ‘of hope. Perfection?’

Next she went to the red tulip. More perplexed still. Unable to decipher the meaning behind this one.

And in the doorway Henry took a deep breath, cleared his throat and said, ‘… a declaration of love.’

She turned to see him there and stood from her seat, crossing to where he stood.

Falling over his words, he said, ‘I … Miss Frye, you must know that I hold you in the highest esteem … and regard. And I wonder if you would do me the

honour of … If you would, give me your hand … in matrimony.’

Evie Frye took Henry’s hands, looked up into a face she loved with eyes that were misty with tears.

And, yes, he knew she felt the same.

List of Characters

Frederick Abberline: police officer, later promoted to sergeant
Ajay: Indian Assassin, custodian at The Darkness
The bodyguard: an ex-soldier who sees the error of his ways
Boot: a terrible pickpocket and an even worse courier
Sir David Brewster: scientist and Templar
James Thomas Brudenell: Templar, Starrick's lieutenant
Cavanagh: director of the Metropolitan Railway, Templar
Benjamin Disraeli: politician
Mary Anne Disraeli: wife of Benjamin
Rupert Ferris: head of Ferris Ironworks, Templar
John Fowler: chief engineer for the Metropolitan Railway, responsible for the construction of the world's first underground line
Ethan Frye: Assassin and mentor to Jayadeep Mir, father to Evie and Jacob
Evie Frye: Assassin and twin to Jacob, daughter of Ethan
Jacob Frye: Assassin and twin to Evie, son of Ethan, head of the Rooks
Catherine Gladstone: wife to William
William Ewert Gladstone: Chancellor of the Exchequer
Hardy: one of Cavanagh's strongarms, a punisher
Other Hardy: one of Cavanagh's strongarms, also a punisher
Leonard Hazlewood: private detective
Pyara Kaur: wife to Arbaaz Mir, mother to Jayadeep
Kulpreet: Indian Assassin, custodian at The Darkness
Colonel Walter Lavelle: Templar
Maggie: a friend of The Ghost and 'mother' to the unfortunates of the Thames Tunnel
Marchant: site manager at the Metropolitan Railway
Arbaaz Mir: Indian Assassin, father to Jayadeep

Jayadeep Mir aka The Ghost, Bharat Singh and Henry Green: Assassin undercover agent
Charles Pearson: Solicitor of London and the ‘father’ of the London Underground
Mary Pearson: wife to Charles
Aubrey Shaw: police officer
Duleep Singh: maharajah and Assassin contact
Smith: another of Cavanagh’s strongarms, and the third punisher
Crawford Starrick: Templar Grand Master
Lucy Thorne: Templar, expert in the occult
Philip ‘Plutus’ Twopenny: the governor of the Bank of England, Templar
Robert Waugh: pornographer with links to the Templars
George Westhouse: Assassin

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